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Le Mauvais Jardinier : a reassessment of the myths and music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji

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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

KING'S COLLEGE

LE MAUVAIS JARDINIER: A REASSESSMENT OF THE MYTHS AND MUSIC
OF KAIKHOSRU SHAPURJI SORABJI

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

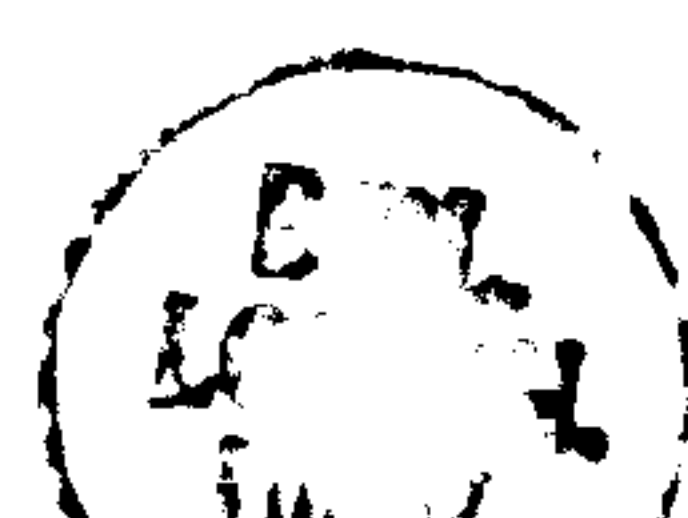
DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC

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IN

ORIGINAL

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the presence, extent, and implications of notational problems to be found within Sorabji's published and unpublished scores. These are introduced in relation to previously accepted ideas concerning the composer and his music, and serve as a starting point for a reassessment of the nature of his compositions.

Following an overview of the Sorabji literature, the second chapter examines some over-favourable and misleading opinions of the composer's methods and abilities. Evidence is presented that contradicts these; it is noted that his manuscripts and publications contain numerous errors and ambiguities, rather than demonstrating a conscientious and efficient approach to composition.

The central portion discusses in detail the problems of notation to be found in Sorabji's published and unpublished works. It separates mistakes made during the writing out of the scores from the purely idiosyncratic elements that were introduced, and then developed or discarded, during the course of his career, and draws attention to those that compromise compositional continuity and design.

The remainder of the thesis deals with the implications of these issues; primarily the question of whether—especially in the light of his ban on public performance of his music—they disqualify Sorabji from consideration as a “genuine” and competent composer: was the *act* of composition more important to him than the sounding result? Reasons for the errors in the scores are therefore discussed, as well as his failure to correct them subsequently. An overview of the development of form and style throughout his output considers his compositional commitment from another perspective, including its relationship to contemporary musical issues. In the light of this attempts are made to determine which of his pieces are successful according to his stylistic terms; is it possible to consider Sorabji's output a valuable contribution to twentieth century music in spite of its flaws?

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I am indebted to Marc-André Roberge for answering certain obscure biographical questions; also to Christopher Berg for his willingness to debate matters of editorial procedure: his insights have helped shape my own approach where the creation of Sorabji editions is concerned.

I am grateful to Ronald Stevenson and Barry Ould for kindly granting permission for me to obtain a copy of Stevenson's original pencil sketch of Sorabji's Fantasiettina, along with the draft score that forms the basis of the 1987 Bardic Edition.

Special thanks are due to my supervisor, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson: not only for overseeing the creation of this thesis, but also for lending me, nearly ten years ago, his copy of the published score of Opus clavicembalisticum, along with John Ogdon's recording—thus providing my initial (long-awaited!) sight and sound of Sorabji's music, as well as sowing the seeds for the subsequent years of invigorating debate!

I am also grateful to Jim Samson and David Fanning for kindly agreeing to act as examiners for this thesis.

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Music examples are reproduced with the kind permission of The Sorabji Archive, Bath, England.

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CHAPTER 1

A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

When musicians criticize music or formulate theories about it, they are not trying to describe the phenomena of music in strictly factual terms or to account for them in a neutral or objective manner; they are not in other words, trying to be psychologists or social scientists. On the contrary, they are working within a musical culture, which is to say that they are operating within the framework or presuppositions or (if you like) prejudices that constitute a culture.¹

It is part of human nature that any knowledge that we may acquire is inevitably categorised and related to that which we already know. Thus when something unexpected comes along that does not fit into our intellectual canon it is either rejected (as wrong) or an elaborate framework is constructed to bridge the intervening abyss at its closest point. As nature abhors a vacuum, so musicians (and journalists) abominate a secret.

Few composers have presented such potential for misunderstanding as Kaikhosru Sorabji. His reclusive nature and his apparent refusal to countenance public performance of his works for much of his lifetime make “good copy”, while the tremendous length and complexity of many of his works similarly makes them cry out for attention. Indeed, there has for a long time been an implicit connection between the nature of Sorabji’s works and the supposition that he might be a closet genius: someone who writes out at high speed extremely long and complex works, without sketches or crossings-out, must surely be either a genius or a madman.

¹ Nicholas Cook, Music Imagination and Culture (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 3.

The problem with many of the older studies and opinions relating to Sorabji's music is that they have necessarily been founded upon a limited knowledge of his output: the vast majority of his works were never published, and remained inaccessible until after his death. Furthermore, those that were generally available were mostly immature compositions; more importantly, they were—inevitably—pieces written before the change in attitude that led to the composer's unofficial ban on performance of his work. How can one therefore rely on judgements concerning what amounts to juvenilia when the bulk of what might be regarded as Sorabji's most characteristic work might never have been intended to be published or even played? The aim of this thesis is therefore to strip away some of the myths surrounding Sorabji's music and the way in which it was composed. Once this has been done, we can identify and examine some of the real problems that beset his music; problems such as the numerous uncorrected errors of notation, and the implications they have for study and performance of his music today.

Survey Of The Literature

The literature on Sorabji and his works can be divided into two very general groups: 1) articles (mostly reviews) written at the time that his work was still being published and performed—i.e., until the mid-1930's; 2) articles and scholarly writings written after the ban was unofficially lifted, which might be dated from the concert given (with Sorabji's blessing) at the Wigmore Hall by Yonty Solomon on 7 December 1976. This grouping is not exclusive—there are at least two articles not covered by these two periods, and Sorabji's own second collection of essays, Mi Contra Fa, was published in 1947—but the generalisation has the advantage of revealing the hiatus in discussion caused by Sorabji's "ban" and gradual withdrawal

from public musical life. This arrangement is also useful in that the earlier group deals only with the published works, while the later group gives a broader view of Sorabji's output.

Articles And Reviews That Appeared Prior To Sorabji's Ban

Among the earliest discussions of Sorabji's music, Harvey Grace's examination of the published score of Piano Sonata No. 1 (London: London & Continental Music Publishing Co., 1921) set a pattern that was to be followed in subsequent reviews:

Not often is one so baffled by the printed page. . . . But music of this type should be written for an automatic instrument, not one calling for the agency of human fingers. Mr. Sorabji would have done better to publish it straight away as a player-piano roll. I hear that a Sonata No. 2 is on the way, so perhaps he will consider the suggestion.²

Needless to say, Sorabji did nothing of the sort, and Grace's review of Piano Sonata No. 2 repeated the plea, with the significant comment that:

The music is unplayable for all but virtuosi; it is of such complexity that mental hearing of it is impossible save in brief passages; and a painful reading of it at the keyboard is useless, because music so dissonant cannot be judged when played at any but its rightful speed, when the various conflicting elements fall into place instead of sticking out.³

This theme was taken up in a review of the later, transitional, work Le Jardin

Parfumé:

I cannot review this piece. . . . I . . . must remark that I cannot play the music, nor yet read it. It eludes my translating eye as completely as it eludes my fingers. Only this is clear, that given a piano of celestial tone, a pianist whose technique is transcendently delicate, sure and strong, and whose mind is that of the poet-musician, the piece must prove fascinating. The composer is such a pianist, and if he were by me at the moment I would have him play the piece half-a-dozen times, and then say something about it. . . .

² Harvey Grace, "New Music", The Musical Times 62 (1 November 1921): 781.

³ Harvey Grace, "New Music", The Musical Times 65 (1 June 1924): 520.

Sorabji composes without preliminary sketch or draft, whether for full orchestra or for piano; and in the case of the piano music he does not “feel it out” beforehand at the keyboard. This betokens a masterly certainty; and it really makes one impatient that he does not come forth and play us his works.⁴

One can’t help wondering to what extent the many errors in the published score of Le Jardin Parfumé (most of them deriving from the autograph manuscript, and strictly-speaking rendering the music unplayable *as notated*) served to confuse Grew and other readers and reviewers, but certainly the widespread inability to place the music into the context of a realisable performance (or at least to perceive it in a meaningful aural context) may well account for the difficulties that Sorabji faced in being taken seriously as a composer by a wider circle than his immediate friends.

One of the longest and most detailed articles of the day at least made an attempt to delve deeper into the nature of his works from an open-minded point of view. A. G. Browne’s study of the music deals exclusively with the published pieces, although he mentions in passing some of those remaining in manuscript, admitting that “these I have not seen.”⁵ Unfortunately, although well-intentioned, Browne’s writing displays the same inability to come to grips with the music as the other authors. It doesn’t help that he dithers unnecessarily over the musical style, opening with the remark that “Sorabji’s music is decidedly novel, quite unlike anything that is being written today,” continuing with, “It is probable that those who have glanced through Sorabji’s work have detected certain resemblances to Alexander Skryabin,” and then firmly stating that “Sorabji is really an impressionist.” Similarly, his

⁴ Sydney Grew, “Kaikhosru Sorabji—‘Le Jardin Parfumé’: Poem for Piano”, The British Musician 4 (May 1928): 85–86.

⁵ Arthur G. Browne, “The Music of Kaikhosru Sorabji”, Music and Letters 11 (January 1930): 6–16.

assertion that the harmonies (and in particular the use of massive chords occupying many registers of the piano—although this is not clear from the passage) “should be treated as block sounds which happen to appeal particularly to the composer” does not sit especially comfortably with some of his later comments:

It would be easy to suggest that the massive chords, the clusters of notes, the complicated cadenzas, the whole form of the works, are a result of extensive extemporisation at the keyboard. The aspect of the piano music does indeed suggest some manufacture. Happily we happen to know that Sorabji adopts quite another method for his composition. For these immensely long and complicated works, no rough sketch is made. The notes are written straight into full score which remains the final version.⁶

Turning to the use (or non-use) of form, Browne runs into further difficulties. Starting with the by now familiar complaints as to the difficulty and complexity of the music, and using words such as “obscurity” and “labyrinth”, he comments that:

“Themes” are not easily discernible in Sorabji’s music except where a fugal subject makes its appearance, and then, having discovered this, one hunts the preceding odd twenty pages in an attempt to find the initial idea. This is a wearisome task and often fruitless.⁷

He then makes what he admits is a general deduction that:

The plan of the compositions seems to be roughly:- A (initial subject), B (development), A (initial subject modified in some way), C (further development), A (initial subject again modified), D (coda based on initial subject). This rondo-like form is frequently interspersed with very florid cadenzas.⁸

All this seems almost disapproving, if regretfully so, but Browne’s closing remarks are more optimistic, and by now familiar:

Mr. Sorabji can play his own music, and those parts of the Piano Concerto I have heard in this way seemed to justify Sorabji’s complicated method of expression.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

Comprehension of an entire work, and an orchestral work also, would, of course, be more difficult to appreciate and to understand. Hearing part of the Concerto showed how useless it is to judge Sorabji's music on paper. The vitality of this Concerto as played by Sorabji himself convinced me of the desirability of considering his music seriously. We can only hope that some effort will soon be made to give it public performance.⁹

The comment about the uselessness of judging his music on paper is significant, since as well as pointing to the inability of most people to "auralise" his work, it could even imply (as with Le Jardin Parfumé) a possible discrepancy between what was played and what was written.

This is the last major overview of Sorabji's published works dating from this earlier period. Browne's article appeared in 1930, the same year that Opus clavicembalisticum, the last of these publications, and easily the largest work yet to appear, was completed and received its first public performance at the hands of the composer.¹⁰ According to witnesses this premiere performance took some two and a half hours in total (excluding intervals, since Sorabji apparently made a spur-of-the-moment decision to omit the two intervals planned to separate the three main sections for fear that his concentration might be broken). The implications of this will be considered in chapter 2.

This score appeared in print the following year, but, no doubt given the great length and complexity of the work, there was no sudden rush of performances. In fact,

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ By this time Sorabji had already given the first performances of Piano Sonata No. 1, Trois poèmes pour chant et piano, Piano Sonata No. 2, Djami, and Piano Sonata No. 4. He had also, in April of that year, given a live broadcast for the BBC of Le Jardin Parfumé, which prompted Delius to write to him, expressing his enjoyment. It is worth noting in passing that, with the exception of Le Jardin Parfumé and the Trois poèmes (in which he obviously had to collaborate with a singer), all Sorabji's premieres were performed from manuscript. The significance of this will become apparent in chapter 2.

its next concert appearance was not until 10 March 1936, when Part I was presented in London by John Tobin. This was only the third time that a Sorabji work had been performed by someone other than the composer.¹¹ Sorabji had approved of the previous two interpretations, especially E. Emlyn Davies's reading of the second movement of Organ Symphony No. 1, which he praised publicly on several occasions. Unfortunately, Tobin's performance, if not the music itself, met with rather less success. According to the most important review of this concert:

He seemed to have very little conception of how the work should sound, or any adequate grasp of it as a whole, otherwise he could hardly have inflicted upon the audience a performance at half the proper speed. The time taken for his performance was eighty minutes; according to the composer's intentions it should take not more than forty.¹²

While the controversy concerning the tempo and timing is an issue that has significance far beyond this one concert, a fuller discussion will be undertaken in chapter 2, where it can be seen in its proper context. Apart from severely criticising Tobin, this article, written by someone who was obviously very pro-Sorabji, raises a couple of other issues of some interest concerning the latter's position in the musical society of the time.¹³ The usual remarks about Sorabji's abilities as an interpreter appear, but they are set up against the effect of Tobin's effort on the listener:

¹¹ The other occasions were: Harold Rutland's performance of Fragment Written for Harold Rutland (original version) on 12 October 1927, and E. Emlyn Davies's performance of the second movement of Organ Symphony No. 1 on 17 May 1928.

¹² Edward Clarke Ashworth, "Opus clavicembalisticum", The New English Weekly, 30 April 1936, 55.

¹³ Edward Clarke Ashworth was a friend of Sorabji's, as may be guessed from the remark about "repeated hearings at the composer's own hands." Sorabji dedicated a couple of works to him: the Symphonic Variations for solo piano (the notes E, C, A, play a prominent role in the theme; the initials of dedicatees were often used by the composer as a basis for thematic material), and probably also "Quaere reliqua hujus

Such a performance is more likely to confirm the prevalent and quite erroneous notion that Mr. Sorabji's works are incomprehensible, tedious, dry and cacophonous, and it is a very great pity that the composer himself was not secured to play the work on this great occasion.¹⁴

These comments can be seen as underlying a clear polarisation of opinion. On the one hand, we hear of the perfidy of the critics of the day, who were apparently incapable of making a rational judgement:

One "critic" in particular distinguished himself over the matter. Arriving half-an-hour late, listening for two minutes and then proceeding to read during the whole of the rest of the time, he had the effrontery to write a notice that it would not be easy to surpass for scurrilousness and abuse. Publication of any new work by Mr. Sorabji or any of the very (and far too) rare performances of his compositions is invariably a signal for an outburst of abuse and malice on the part of the generality of critics that is in itself, to a discerning mind, a sign of the startling importance of his musical contribution.¹⁵

On the other hand, we have those supporters who "have learned to know and appreciate the supreme qualities of Sorabji's work, which, as a great Scottish critic and writer has said, 'To those who *know* ranks among the greatest work of our time'".¹⁶

Mr. Sorabji's immense composition is widely spoken of by authoritative opinion as one of the supreme works written for the piano; only, in fact, to be compared with the great Bach work already mentioned [*The Art of Fugue*], and the Diabelli Variations of Beethoven, an opinion that in the present writer's estimation is fully confirmed by repeated hearings at the composer's own hands.¹⁷

This opinion was echoed in a later article, as well as by Sorabji himself:

materiei inter secretiora".

¹⁴ Ashworth, 55.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

He has . . . no illusions as to his position in the hierarchy of Parnassus, and in the course of a letter to Nicolas Slonimsky (quoted on p. 325 of *Music Since 1900*) he wrote, “The *Opus Clavicembalisticum* has been described as the greatest and most important work for piano since *The Art of Fugue*, as indeed it is. . . . I have no such false modesty nor mock-humility in my make-up, so do not be surprised at the calm way in which I recognize the importance of my own work!”¹⁸

The extravagance of these remarks makes it understandable that Sorabji and his music made many enemies, particularly in the musical establishment. On the other hand, his supporters also included not a few musicians of stature. This is what makes Sorabji such a difficult and yet intriguing figure to study. Claims such as those above invite ridicule, but when a number of important writers and composers, including York Bowen, Clinton Gray-Fisk, Philip Heseltine, John Ireland, Hugh MacDiarmid, A. R. Orage, Egon Petri, Roger Quilter, Denis Saurat, Sacheverell Sitwell, and William Walton, have taken the trouble to support him and his music they cannot be easily dismissed—at least not without serious examination.

With friends and supporters such as these willing to promote his work, and even the vituperative criticism that is supposed to have been levelled at him, the obvious question is: why did Sorabji languish in such obscurity? The simple answer is that he chose to by placing an unofficial embargo on public performance of his music, including any by himself, around 1937.

Hiatus

At this point that there comes a hiatus in the appearance of articles about Sorabji and his music. With the unofficial ban on performances in operation and the lack of any new published scores after 1931 (as well as his refusal to sanction any reprints of

¹⁸ Clinton Gray-Fisk, “Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji”, The Musical Times 101 (April 1960): 232.

the original publications) there was simply nothing worthwhile to write about. Moreover, by the advent of the ban his music had long since ceased to stand at the forefront of musical development; the explosion of new compositional ideas, especially on the Continent, put paid to any ambitions he might have had of establishing a name for himself outside the more conservative climate of the British Isles. His concept of music was, quite simply, out of fashion.¹⁹

Sorabji's main contact with the musical public during this time was therefore through his work as a critic, writing a regular column of concert reviews, originally for The New Age, and later The New English Weekly. As a result there is a large body of material that describes his attitudes towards contemporary trends in composition and performance. These in turn provide useful clues as to his own compositional objectives.

Rather more explicit in this respect are his two books of essays, Around Music and Mi Contra Fa.²⁰ Freed from the necessity of reviewing specific concerts or recordings these reveal the issues that he felt needed to be discussed, as opposed to those he was obliged to tackle (sometimes reluctantly) as part of his job. More importantly, the scale of a book allowed him to go into far greater detail concerning a particular subject than the constraints of a weekly column would permit. So these essays not only provide a more detailed account of Sorabji's opinions but also give a

¹⁹ There is a good case for arguing that this was in fact one of the primary reasons for the ban, although most commentators tend either to be content to relate the ban to Sorabji's exasperation with the performing standards of the day, or to leave this particular interpretation as implicit.

²⁰ Around Music, London: Unicorn Press, 1932; Mi Contra Fa, London: Porcupine Press, 1947.

greater insight into his mode of expression, since his often elaborate sentence constructions are allowed full rein.

Both the essays and the journal columns are remarkable for the savagery of his criticism, as well as the extravagance of his praise, but they amount to more than just a simple collection of “brickbats and bouquets.” Many interesting observations concerning the attitudes of the day can be found, not always to do with music, and many of his reviews are a starting point for a more general commentary. The several performances of Wagner’s “Ring” entire during this period are discussed not only from the point of view of the playing and singing, but also of the staging and overall effect.²¹ Lectures, whether by Dinh Gilly on singing, or by an unidentified Muslim lady on the differences between Indian and Western music, similarly serve as a spring-board for his own opinions.²²

On the other hand, while many of these opinions are remarkable for their perceptiveness, others simply appear eccentric today. Thus Sorabji’s championing of Mahler at a time when his music was little known or heard in this country shows him at his most perceptive, while his sustained attacks on Stravinsky and his admirers display an ideological aversion to the latter’s anti-Romantic approach, rather than any legitimate criticism of performance or structure. Similarly, his attitude towards performance practice, though irreproachable *in principle*, sometimes betrays his Romantic leanings. His concern over the treatment of Baroque music is a recurring theme in his writings:

²¹ For example, his lengthy article “Music: Wagner’s ‘Ring’”, The New Age, 29 May 1924, 54–56.

²² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music”, The New English Weekly, 24 November 1932, 136–38.

The B minor Mass performed by the Bach Choir at Queen's Hall on May 20, proclaimed as a celebratory Diamond Jubilee Concert, was one of the most indifferent I have ever heard. By what right, I ask myself for the howmanieth time, do conductors, choir-trainers and such-like animals presume to arrogate to themselves the right to falsify and distort the intentions of the composer, to set at naught the investigations of great musicologists and scholars, and to defy the established and irrefutable eighteenth-century practice in their treatment, or rather maltreatment, of the figured-bass or "continuo" as it is called? At this concert the usual atrocious practice that has become the fashion during the last few years was followed, that is to say, treating the "continuo" as an occasional obbligato that could either be omitted, chopped or changed about from this instrument to that, and, worst of all, played only as a bass without any filling and fulfilling harmony. How many more times must it be repeated what a "continuo" is, namely—as its name implies—something that goes on *all* the time, a solid core of harmony against the firm background of which the instrumental and vocal parts deploy themselves as a trellis-work of decoration? Deprived of this, the trellis-work is senseless, it is a virginia creeper with nothing to creep upon, crawling humiliated, spineless and meaningless upon the ground. Must one again and yet again urge upon the people responsible for this damnable malpractice to study the authorities upon these matters, such as Dr. Schweitzer and Professor Arnold, who have both raised their voices in indignation against it? Here, indeed, we see a dire example of that "vanity native to the concert platform" to which Busoni so witheringly refers in his edition of the Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue. Must one once again inform conductors of that which any music-school student learns in his first year, that a figured-bass is a piece of musical shorthand indicating a *complete* harmonic scheme and treatment?²³

Again in a long detailed and deeply interesting letter on the subject written in reply to my enquiry as to whether Professor Arnold could suggest any reason for the outrageous disregard of Bach's intentions that is the rule in this matter today, he said: "Still, I believe that the *main* reason for the flagrant disregard of Bach's intentions (about which I feel so strongly that I find it difficult to speak peaceably about it) is *ignorance*. Many people entirely misunderstand the true nature and function—the inner meaning so to speak—of the figured Continuo. They regard it in the case of a Solo, as merely *complementary* to the principal part, instead of being the all-containing entity it actually is." Professor Arnold went on to deal with other abuses, the results, as he put it, "of ignorance and laziness" (when such books as Dolmetsch's "Interpretation of the Music of the 17th and 18th Centuries" are available) which, shocking as they are, are of too technical a nature to go into here, but they reveal a state of affairs that is lamentable.²⁴

²³ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music", The New English Weekly, 4 June 1936, 153.

²⁴ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music: The Contemporary Maltreatment of the Continuo", The New English Weekly, 1 October 1942, 198.

Sorabji's own attitude towards Baroque performance was much the same as Wanda Landowka's, favouring the legendary Pleyel harpsichord with its variety of stops, or, alternatively, judicious modifications to the writing:

An eminently successful and legitimate "liberty" on the part of the pianist was the doubling of the bass in octaves in the B minor prelude, played at a *mezzo-staccato*, giving the effect of a *continuo* played upon the pedal-organ of an organ. Devices such as these are not only perfectly unexceptional, but really right and proper, in the playing of Bach's works (written for instruments with mutation and coupler devices as they were) upon the modern piano, which unhappily lacks these. Every organist does it as a matter of course, and no-one dreams of questioning it. Such things are only *wrong* when done clumsily or crudely. For instance, no one, I imagine, in his sane senses would want to begin a fugue in a quiet vein, with the subject blared out upon a heavy-wind-pressure Tuba upon the Solo Organ, nor, analogously would think of hammering it out in octaves upon the piano, *fortissimo*.²⁵

This emphasis on the spirit, rather than the letter, of the score, and the resulting willingness to take "liberties" where "necessary" is of great significance to Sorabji studies and will be discussed in detail in chapter 6.

With these and so many other issues being raised in the corpus of criticism it is perhaps surprising that more studies of it have not been written. As it is, the only significant articles to date deal with the writings from The New Age: a largely critical overview of Sorabji's writing by Arnold Whittall, dating from the 1960s,²⁶ and a later survey of the reviews of British composers in the same paper by Nazlin Bhimani, of which more below.²⁷ Unfortunately, the contributions to The New English Weekly

²⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music", The New English Weekly, 22 November 1934, 139.

²⁶ Arnold Whittall, "Sorabjiana", The Musical Times 107 (March 1966): 216–17.

²⁷ Nazlin Bhimani, "Kaikhosru Sorabji's Writings on British Music in 'The New Age' (1923-34)" (MA diss., University of British Columbia, 1985).

have so far been ignored, and we are similarly awaiting a major critique of Around Music or Mi Contra Fa.

The torrent of critical opinion flowing from Sorabji's pen gradually slowed to a trickle during the 1940s as he became less enamoured of the live concert, and performing standards in general. He took a particular interest in the developments of recording technology, and the majority of his later articles are record reviews rather than concert reviews. Nevertheless, even these rapidly decrease in frequency, eventually giving way to only occasional letters-to-the-editor, which were just as likely to invoke political or religious issues as musical ones.

The Sorabji Literature Since The End Of The Ban

The advent of the second main group of Sorabji literature coincides with the unofficial ending of his ban on public performance of his works, marked by the concert given by Yonty Solomon at the Wigmore Hall, London, on December 7 1976. With performances now starting to be programmed, interest was aroused once more in the composer, whose music had been unavailable, except via the few published works, for forty years. Paul Rapoport produced an article to coincide with the Solomon concert, with the hopeful title "Sorabji returns?".²⁸ This included a reminder to the public and musicians of the nature of Sorabji's music, an explanation of his absence from everyday musical life, and a brief discussion of the problems now faced in "rediscovering" the music. Rapoport raises several important points. Regarding the nature of the compositions he writes:

²⁸ Paul Rapoport, "Sorabji returns?", The Musical Times 117 (December 1976): 995.

Many . . . are of enormous intricacy and length, reflecting his interests in Eastern arts and philosophies, especially Persian and Indian. These interests are also suggested by his music's irregular metric patterns and phrasing, rhythmically complex counterpoint, and improvisational nature—features which reinforce each other. Even in the massive fugues of his keyboard works, where ornamentation is much more limited and a regular pulse is heard, metre follows phrasing, tonality is elusive, and subjects are often treated quite freely. Thus, in Sorabji's usage, Baroque principles, such as fugue and variation, have much in common with Eastern decoration and structure. Both also tend to lack dramatic dualism and "closed" formal patterns, both of which Sorabji used only rarely.²⁹

As for the Solomon concert, he notes that "this reflects only a very limited removal of the ban: performers are still confronted with Sorabji's copyright and "right of public performance reserved" on every published score. Moreover, three short works can hardly be taken as representative."³⁰ And, more seriously, he introduces for the first time the difficulties that are currently facing prospective performers and editors of Sorabji's music:

The published versions and manuscripts of his music are replete with fundamental problems that may not be solvable. Even if the freeze on performances does thaw, those who believe in Sorabji's music will have decades of work even to produce a barely adequate representation of his vaster creations.³¹

Rapoport's "fundamental problems" include the numerous errors in the score that have been mentioned above in connection with Grew's review of Le Jardin Parfumé. They are also referred to in the course of a "style analysis" of this work by Michael Habermann:

There are a number of notational ambiguities and apparent misprints in the published score which need clarification and correction. Yet a comparison between the printed edition and the manuscript, which is now located in the music

²⁹ Ibid. It should be noted that the underlining here is Sorabji's, taken from his own annotated copy of the article. Of the highlighted phrase he has this to say: "This is really very perceptive and intelligent n'est ce pas?"

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ At this point Sorabji has added: "NB. This rules them out completely!!!".

library of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, does not help solve many problems: the two are almost identical.³²

However, although he draws attention to this problem, and even gives us an example of inaccurate notation in the published edition, he does not discuss the problems in depth; nor does he draw any conclusions or point to any relationships between these “mistakes” and the nature of Le Jardin Parfumé and its position in Sorabji’s output.³³ More importantly, he does not reveal that “errors” and other difficulties can be found in many of Sorabji’s other manuscripts, especially those of the larger and more complicated pieces. It is instead left to Kevin Bowyer, who is currently in the process of editing and preparing for performance Sorabji’s three Organ Symphonies, to develop further the issue of errors and notational problems mentioned by Habermann:

There are . . . many difficulties that face the prospective performer of any of these unpublished works. In fact the difficulties are really the same as those which faced the engravers of the works which were published—which explains the large numbers of misprints. With Sorabji the first draft of a work was usually the finished copy—he made almost no initial sketches, composing directly from page one to the end. This manner of working coupled with the kind of pen that he used and, most of all, the sheer speed with which he wrote means that there are many ambiguities, sometimes even errors, in the manuscripts. His life-long friend, Norman Peterkin, described Sorabji’s speech as “almost illegible”, his thoughts racing far ahead of his ability to form words. This feverish and frenzied speed is very apparent in his handwritten letters and his manuscript [of Organ Symphony

³² Michael Habermann, “Sorabji’s Piano Music”, in Sorabji: A Critical Celebration, ed. Paul Rapoport (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 333–89. This chapter is based on Habermann’s DMA dissertation, “A Style Analysis of the Nocturnes for Solo Piano by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji with Special Emphasis on ‘Le Jardin Parfumé’”, DMA, Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, 1985 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1985). The dissertation also provides in an appendix a list of possible corrections to the published score.

³³ Le Jardin Parfumé is essentially a transitional work, coming between Piano Sonatas Nos. 2 and 3 (which Habermann himself describes as belonging “to an experimental phase in [Sorabji’s] composing career”) and Organ Symphony No. 1, regarded by Sorabji as his first “mature” work. The evolution of Sorabji’s notation during this period, and its relationship to his stylistic development, will be considered in more depth in chapter 3.

No.2]. One needs to be completely familiar with his handwriting style to know exactly which note is intended—his wedge-shaped note heads are very often positioned with the extremist [sic] ambiguity and an accidental may be almost indecipherable or may appear to be misplaced. For example, what appears to be a sharp in the D space may be placed before what appears to be an F. A decision must be made in all cases. At the other end of the scale, sometimes the rhythmic patterns do not add up; a string of 24 semiquavers in the left hand may be accidentally pitted against a string of 28 in the right in a passage which precludes the possibility of using “irrational” values—four semiquavers must be added to the left hand or four semiquavers must pack their bags in the right; however, all thematic references must remain undisturbed and the ebb and flow of the phrase as a whole must remain unaltered. I have even come across two or three places where the composer forgets that he is writing in the bass clef and suddenly starts to write in the treble with no pause in between. A bass E, for example, might be tied, over a page-turn, to a treble C, both these notes occupying the same space on the staff; the phrase might lead smoothly up to the E and away from the C—obviously no compromise is achieved by simply obeying the pitches and playing the notes that are actually written—the passage must be reworked so that the smooth flow of the phrase is preserved as the composer might have conceived it. All this demonstrates quite forcibly that it is not normally practical, in fact it is often a decidedly bad idea, to perform directly from the manuscripts.³⁴

Bowyer’s comments are useful and authoritative, coming from someone who is examining his subject from the viewpoints of editor and performer, and they raise a number of important points both about Sorabji’s approach to composition and the possibility of editing and performing his music in the future: points that have yet to be addressed in any systematic way or depth.

Part of the reason for this lack is that even with Sorabji’s music starting to reappear on concert programmes there was still for many years a relative paucity of available research material. This was to remain the case until at least the 1990s: during his lifetime the composer’s manuscripts were not available for study, nor were other unpublished documents relating to his life and work. This has resulted in many articles being only general or introductory in nature—as can be seen from their titles:

³⁴ Kevin Bowyer, “Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988) (part ii)”, *Organist’s Review* 78, no. 4 (December 1992): 284.

“Sorabji”; “Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji”; “The Search for Sorabji”.³⁵ Furthermore, any examination of his music was restricted to those works published in the 1920s and 1930s, which, as we shall see in the following chapters, are not necessarily representative in terms of style or skill.

Even in the case of Marjorie Maulsby Benson’s examination of Opus clavicembalisticum (in relation to Busoni’s Fantasia contrappuntistica), one of the few in-depth studies of a specific Sorabji work, the result is ultimately disappointing.³⁶ Much of the information can now be seen to be misleading or inaccurate, and in the sections where she attempts to analyse the music she rarely does so in any real depth; one cannot help wishing occasionally that she had been a little more daring in her deductions. Her conclusion, that Opus clavicembalisticum is a type of toccata, is reasonable, but this information could be taken much further. Sorabji’s First Toccata and Toccatinetta were written not long before Opus clavicembalisticum. The two earlier works have a similar form (with a prelude replacing the chorale-prelude in the smaller work due to restrictions of scale), suggesting that Sorabji had by that stage developed certain ideas about his own definition of the toccata form. Moreover, Toccatinetta might legitimately be seen as a satellite work for Opus clavicembalisticum, as the fundamental thematic material for the former reappears in

³⁵ Michael Habermann, “Sorabji”, Keyboard 12 (April 1986): 56–62; Donald Garvelmann, “Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji”, Journal of the American Liszt Society 4 (December 1978): 18–22; Michael Habermann, “Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji”, The Piano Quarterly 31 (Summer 1983): 36–37; Peter Pirie, “The Search for Sorabji”, Music and Musicians 28 (November 1979): 16–20.

³⁶ Marjorie Maulsby Benson, “The ‘Opus clavicembalisticum’ by Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Analysis, with References to its Model, the ‘Fantasia contrappuntistica’ by Ferruccio Busoni”, DMA, American Conservatory of Music, 1987 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1987).

an almost identical form in the latter; similarly there is also a clear relationship between the treatment of material in the passacaglias of the two works (again allowing for a difference in scale). Sorabji's other two extant piano toccatas, the Second and Fourth (the only manuscript of Toccata No. 3, which was given to Clinton Gray-Fisk, to whom it was dedicated, went missing after his death) boast an expanded basic form that displays more than a passing resemblance to Opus clavicembalisticum, so it is not unreasonable to suggest that the latter represents an important turning point in the development of Sorabji's conception of toccata form.

The most prolific recent writer on Sorabji is Marc-André Roberge, Professor of Musicology at Université Laval, Québec. Roberge's writings arise out of a wider study of "a number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century composer-pianists who have long been considered outsiders in European music history", and certain twentieth-century composers and musicians, belonging to what he has called a "Busoni network".³⁷

A group of composers and performers who can be linked in one or more ways to Busoni and, to a lesser extent, to Sorabji: they had studied with Busoni or with one of his pupils; they had performed works by Busoni or Sorabji; they had written about either composer; they had transcribed or edited one or more of their works; finally, they incorporated quotations from their works into their own compositions or used them as models. To this core group of (mostly English-speaking) composers could be added numerous editors, musicologists and writers (also mostly English-speaking) as well as friends and disciples of the composers of the network. It is fascinating to see how virtually anyone who is interested in the music of one figure of the network is also a champion of the music of the other composers. Indeed, it is to the existence of this network that we owe this renaissance of interest in a group of composers who were formerly relegated to the footnotes of history or not mentioned at all.³⁸

³⁷ Marc-André Roberge, "The Busoni Network and the Art of Creative Transcription", Canadian University Music Review 11, no. 1 (1991): 68–88.

³⁸ Marc-André Roberge, "Producing Evidence for the Beatification of a Composer: Sorabji's Deification of Busoni", The Music Review 54, no. 2 (May 1992): 123.

Roberge has produced a number of articles and compilations relating to Sorabji, ranging from reviews of new recordings of his music to historical research to indexing and annotations for the composer's critical writing and essays.³⁹ Currently in preparation is a mammoth study of Sorabji's life, with the temporary title, Opus sorabjianum: A Biography of the Parsi Composer, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988), and a critical edition of The Fruits of Misanthropy; Being The Animadversions of a Machiavellian ("Commonplace Book") (1925-30), both of which will undoubtedly inspire and assist further research.

Until then, the most substantial published body of information on Sorabji remains Paul Rapoport's book Sorabji: A Critical Celebration.⁴⁰ Published to celebrate the centenary of Sorabji's birth, this is a collection of essays and reminiscences, most of which were written by people who knew Sorabji personally. A publicity leaflet for the book states its intentions:

This book, the first devoted to Sorabji, explores his life and character, his music, his articles and letters. It both presents the legend accurately and dispels its

³⁹ These include: "Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji's Quintet for Piano and Four Stringed Instruments and its Intended Performance by Norah Drewett and the Hart House String Quartet", in Music in Canada/La musique au Canada: A Collection of Essays, Volume I, ed. Guido Bimberg, Kanada-Studien, im Auftrag des Instituts für Kanada-Studien der Universität Augsburg, Band 25 (Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, 1997): 91–108; "A Few Notes on the State of Research on the Life and Music of Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji", Journal of the Indian Musicological Society (forthcoming: at <http://www.mus.ulaval.ca/roberge/sorabji/notekss.htm>); "Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988)", Sonances 8, no. 2 (Winter 1988–89): 30–37; "Un troisième disque Sorabji par Michael Habermann", Sonances 7, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 35–37; "Geoffrey Douglas Madge, *pianista admirabilis*, et l'*Opus clavicembalisticum* de Sorabji à Montréal", Sonances 4, no. 2 (January 1985): 27–29; "Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, compositeur *sui generis*", Sonances 2, no. 3 (April 1983): 2–8.

⁴⁰ Paul Rapoport, ed., Sorabji: A Critical Celebration (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992).

exaggerated aspects. The portrait which emerges is not of a crank or eccentric but of a highly original and accomplished musical thinker whom recent performances and recordings confirm as unique and important.

The book is divided into three sections: “Discovery,” “The Prose,” and “The Music.” The first of these contains most of the reminiscences and personal viewpoints concerning Sorabji. In addition, Paul Rapoport attempts to identify some of the main misconceptions made about Sorabji and explain them in a plausible manner; he has varying degrees of success, for examining and analysing the private life of someone as reclusive as Sorabji is no easy task. The chapters devoted to these matters are intended as a background to the closer examination of Sorabji’s output.

The most useful chapter in this section, and of the book, from a musicological point of view is the fifth, “‘Could you just send me a list of his works?’,” again by Rapoport himself. This gives a brief history of how Sorabji’s works came to be catalogued and some of the problems that arose as this was being done. Most valuable is the complete list of his works, together with dates, movements, page numbers, and other useful and relevant details. The list of compositions given in major musical reference books has long been either incomplete or inaccurate; the current list represents “a ‘complete provisional’ chronological catalogue of Sorabji’s compositions.”

Counted among “The Prose” section are selections from Sorabji’s private correspondence, including his letters to Philip Heseltine, and from his published writings. Here also is one of the two chapters in the book derived from dissertations: “Sorabji’s Music Criticism,” by Nazlin Bhimani.⁴¹

⁴¹ Derived from: Bhimani, “Sorabji’s Writings on British Music”.

As indicated above, Bhimani's study fills an important gap in the Sorabji literature; she herself points out that "the literature dealing with Sorabji's journalism is minuscule, principally comprising a two-page article by Arnold Whittall,⁴² a paragraph by Paul Rapoport,⁴³ an article on Sorabji's criticism of English opera in The New Age by John Steane,⁴⁴ and a few sentences in music reference books." She makes the interesting point that "Clinton Gray-Fisk acclaimed Sorabji as one of the leading music critics in England, surpassing both George Bernard Shaw and Ernest Newman." That he did not become better-known to a wider audience for his critical writings, and thus more frequently discussed, is due to his writing being "limited to one country (England) and, more specifically, to one readership (the subscribers of magazines devoted to the propagation of the doctrine of Social Credit) during a specific period (roughly 1925-45)."⁴⁵

In her conclusion Bhimani outlines the relationship she sees between Sorabji's compositions and music criticism:

There was an intimate relationship between his critical aesthetics and his music: his compositions contain many of the characteristics he championed in the music of other composers, e.g. baroque structural principles, romantic and post-romantic harmony and grandeur, impressionistic colour, subtly flexible rhythms without regular barlines, virtuosity and ornamentation which are integral to the musical conception, seamless musical forms, music which is deeply serious or even religious in its effect, and so on. Of the influences of serialism and neoclassicism

⁴² Whittall, 216–17.

⁴³ Paul Rapoport, Opus est: Six Composers from Northern Europe (London: Kahn and Averill, 1978), 162–63.

⁴⁴ John Steane, "English Opera Criticism in the Interwar Years: Sorabji of *The New Age*", Opera 36 (June 1985): 623–31.

⁴⁵ Roberge, "Sorabji's Deification of Busoni", 135.

or of Stravinsky's rhythmic and structural innovations there is no trace in Sorabji's music or in most of the music he reviewed positively.⁴⁶

Michael Habermann's chapter on "Sorabji's Piano Music," which, as the other dissertation-derived study, has already been referred to, opens the section of the book devoted to "The Music." This begins with a general survey and discussion of Sorabji's piano music, before moving on to the "style analysis" of Le Jardin Parfumé that has already been discussed. The result is a useful introduction to some of the techniques that were to become part of Sorabji's compositional arsenal, especially in the slow "nocturnes" and "arias."

On the other hand, the description of this book section as a whole is somewhat misleading because, with the exception of a register of performances of Sorabji's works (up to the end of 1991), and a list of the texts used in the vocal pieces, the solo piano music is all that is discussed. There is no mention of the songs, the organ music, the piano concertos, or the orchestral works. This is disappointing, for while the solo piano music makes up the major part of his output, the other categories each contain a number of works, and the three Organ Symphonies in particular represent a significant addition to the repertoire of the twentieth century for that instrument.

The conclusion that one comes to upon studying this book is that it is a useful source of material, but only serves as an introduction: individual articles are variable in quality and value, and it is not really systematic enough or sufficiently conclusive to be regarded as a definitive reference, grateful though we must be that any book on this scale exists at all. Perhaps it is only intended to stimulate further study, but for the

⁴⁶ Nazlin Bhimani, "Sorabji's Music Criticism", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 280–81.

moment there are few other large studies that give an insight into the underlying issues behind Sorabji's compositions and their nature.

Conclusion

If the material being produced today is more enthusiastic than that of the first wave of Sorabji articles in the 1920s and 30s it should be remembered that we have a number of advantages. The most important of these is the ability to view his output in its entirety: earlier critics were effectively limited to the small number of works that had actually been published. In fact, it is fair to say that the opportunities for study have been greatly increased only since Sorabji's death and the foundation of the Sorabji Archive in 1988, allowing greater freedom of access to the unpublished scores.

It must also be borne in mind that of the works that were published during Sorabji's lifetime by far the majority were written in an early style that is, because it had not fully developed, sometimes actually more difficult to read and comprehend than the more carefully structured material produced after the mid-1920s (Piano Sonata No. 2 is a good example). When this is considered in conjunction with the conservative musical outlook prevalent in England at the time, it is not particularly surprising that commentators had difficulty in getting to grips with his writing: "There seem to be some interesting oriental colorings in these sonatas, and a few of their passages 'sound' beautifully, but the feeling one derives from them is, in short, that compared to Mr. Sorabji, Arnold Schönberg must be a tame reactionary."⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Paul Bechert, "Persian Composer-Pianist Baffles", Musical Courier, 2 March 1922, 7, quoted in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 242.

In contrast, by the time of the “renaissance” in the late-1970s Sorabji had long since been overtaken by the developments in twentieth century music. Like Richard Strauss, he had begun his compositional career at the forefront of compositional thought and ended it seeming decidedly old-fashioned. This is all the more interesting, bearing in mind that even now Sorabji’s “old-fashioned” outlook sometimes remains somewhat cryptic, even to those who would champion his music.

On the other hand, we do suffer from at least one major disadvantage not faced by earlier critics. Although a small number of recordings of his music are being made today by certain enterprising record companies, we do not have any definitive recordings by Sorabji himself; nor do we have him to demonstrate his music in concert as was the case in the 1920s: the importance of this should not be underestimated. A set of private recordings made by Sorabji for a friend remains extant, but this is problematic: while it provides some idea of his style of playing it is not successful purely from the point of view of accurate performances of his music. We unfortunately have no way of knowing for sure whether the deviations from the score and rhythmic irregularities were part of his playing even when he was in his prime. The time of two and a half hours that he is supposed to have taken to play Opus clavicembalisticum at its premiere, and which was accepted without question for many years as the correct duration, seems alarmingly quick.⁴⁸ This surely has

⁴⁸ We should also bear in mind that when the commentators of the period refer to the great length of Sorabji’s works, they are generally not thinking in the same time-scale as more recent writers. As far as Opus clavicembalisticum is concerned recent recordings of the complete work have lasted between four and five hours, despite the duration of two and a half hours appearing in books and articles up until at least the early 1970s. As it is, a work of two to three hours cannot be thought of as exceptional for Sorabji, whose longest pieces (such as the Symphonic Variations in its version for solo piano) have been estimated as requiring as much as eight or nine hours for a complete performance. Piano Symphony No. 5, which rehearsal and

implications both for our perception of Sorabji as a composer and critic and our perception of how his music is supposed to be performed, especially since most of the observers of the time agreed that he was “the only man living who can play his works *as they should be played*.”⁴⁹

Unfortunately, with Sorabji now dead, and with him having been remarkably unforthcoming on such issues as his own compositions and how to perform them during his lifetime we are now faced with the prospect of unravelling these and some of the other myths that have inevitably grown out of the more newsworthy aspects of his life and music if we are to succeed in dealing with the many problems that his music still holds.

Chapter 2 will consider the veracity of the statements concerning Sorabji’s abilities as an interpreter of his music, and as a composer, and the implications that these topics have for other aspects of our knowledge of Sorabji and his music.

performance has demonstrated requires approximately the same time as it was originally thought Opus clavicembalisticum would need, was subtitled Sinfonia brevis by the composer!

⁴⁹ Apparently according to his friend Bernard Bromage; quoted in Ashworth, 55.

CHAPTER 2

MYTHS AND IMAGERY ASSOCIATED WITH SORABJI

As we have seen from the overview of the literature in chapter 1, the facts of Sorabji's life and works are by no means clear in every case. Some writers, usually those working at the time when he was still publishing his music, have had difficulty in coming to grips with the unfamiliar compositional mode of expression. Others have concentrated on the implications of the unofficial ban on public performance of any of the works, or the problems caused by Sorabji's intransigence and unwillingness to speak about his music, not to mention his apparent delight in providing the occasional nugget of misinformation. Much of this work has been hamstrung by, or is the result of a lack of direct documentary evidence.¹ It is therefore not surprising that there are still certain myths circulating concerning—for instance—the way he composed, and his abilities as an interpreter of his own music.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider these two important “myths” and to consider their possible origins. Their importance comes from their fundamental roles in the establishment of Sorabji's reputation as a composer. The circumstances surrounding them provide a background and introduction to the little-known problems within the manuscripts and publications: could the composer's performances, and stories told of the way in which he composed, have given a false impression of the nature of his compositions?

¹ This situation may be improved by Marc-André Roberge's forthcoming biography of Sorabji, Opus Sorabjianum.

Introduction: Sorabji's Compositional Beginnings

To see an example of the problems of misinformation that have arisen one need look no further than the various accounts of Sorabji's compositional beginnings.²

Although the basic elements are reasonably clear, the following four extracts illustrate how the story has been repeated a number of times in slightly differing forms:

In London, where Sorabji lived with his parents, he received his first piano lessons from his mother, probably at an early age, and began attending concerts regularly. His education was largely private; he passed through the hands of several teachers, including the music tutor Charles A. Trew, until about 1915. At that time he began to compose; from then on his development as both pianist and composer became entirely his own responsibility.³

He studied music theory with one Charles Trew who, after taking him through a detailed course of theoretical counterpoint, suddenly and unexpectedly told him to go home and write something of his own. In Sorabji's words, "I went home and had no idea what to do about it, so I wrote down a few cadences, "Frenchified" things à la Ravel, and started to write a few songs. Then I started a piano concerto, and by the time I had realized what I was doing I could not stop myself."⁴

Sorabji was educated privately and his musical training consisted of a prolonged course in conventional counterpoint and harmony under the late Charles Trew, who soon realized that he was dealing with a genius, and insisted on something more substantial than a series of blameless exercises. No thought of composition had hitherto occurred to Sorabji (he had never given any sign of being an infant prodigy), but in deference to his master he produced a few songs which he now describes as "excessively Frenchified". Having once started, he found that he *had* to continue and soon appeared with a Piano Concerto of 177 pages in full score.

² Somewhat ironically, thanks to the extensive extant correspondence between Sorabji and Philip Heseltine these early years are probably better documented than any other aspect of his compositional development (with the possible exception of the letters to Erik Chisholm that trace the composition of Opus clavicembalisticum).

³ Alistair Hinton, "Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji: An Introduction", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 18.

⁴ Hugh Polkinhorn, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Fantaisie Espagnole, Donna Amato (Altarus, AIR-CD-9022, 1993).

This, together with a mass of *juvenilia*, has since been burnt, but it did mark the beginning of Sorabji's career as a composer . . .⁵

'When I was 15, my old Master said to me, "Look," he said, "you ought to start composing." "Oh," but I said, "I never had a thought of doing any such sort of thing." Well he said, "Look here, forget all the things I've taught [you]." [. . .] So I thought, "All right," and I started writing sort of short cadences—you know, very much *à la* Ravel—and he said, "Oh yes, yes, yes, you must go on," so the next thing was a concerto!"'⁶

The difference between these passages raises one question in particular: when did Sorabji actually start to compose? According to Hinton's chapter from A Critical Celebration he started in 1915, aged 23. The Gray-Fisk account would appear to confirm this by mentioning the 177-page concerto, which could only be the Concerto No. 1 pour piano et grand orchestre, op. 3 (1915–16).⁷ However, Gray-Fisk is wrong to say that this concerto was burned by Sorabji: it remains extant. It is known that Sorabji was greatly dissatisfied with many of his earlier pieces to the extent that he wanted them to be destroyed. Thanks to the insistence of Alistair Hinton this was prevented. So it is untrue that Sorabji's earliest known works were destroyed by him, even if that was his intention, but the reported incineration in Gray-Fisk's account always raises the intriguing possibility that there were yet earlier works that did not survive; on the other hand there is no mention of any works prior to 1915 in the Heseltine correspondence, and this apparently describes faithfully Sorabji's initial experiences as a composer. Indeed, Sorabji's letter of 3 February 1914 says, "No! I do

⁵ Gray-Fisk, 230.

⁶ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, interview by Russell Harty for London Weekend Television, 11 June 1977, quoted in Kenneth Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 220.

⁷ The date given at the end of the manuscript is 17 June 1916.

not compose! I have not yet reached that stage. I am plowing though ‘Ebenezer’!’⁸ As for Sorabji’s own account above, which might have been regarded as authoritative, he would have been 15 in 1907, so it contradicts the evidence of his own letters of the time. It is much more likely that this extract is an example of his admitted practice of misleading people as to his true age.⁹

The similarity of these four accounts suggests a common source in information provided by Sorabji. There appears to be no extant written version that could be the original, so it is more likely that the background to these statements is an oral one. Clearly in such situations the slight differences of each telling (either by Sorabji himself or someone else) would multiply, as in a game of “Chinese Whispers”. Furthermore, it is also clear from the language used that the Gray-Fisk account was worded to emphasise Sorabji’s importance and skill as a composer.¹⁰ So it can be seen how, especially when accounts such as these are not juxtaposed, discrepancies may remain unnoticed and erroneous conclusions reached.

⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 3 February 1914, quoted in Derus, “Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 208.

⁹ Later in his life Sorabji had printed a card expressing his displeasure at what he regarded as unwarranted intrusions into his private life. It begins “TO THOSE WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, IF ANY, AND OTHERS WHO MIND ANYBODY’S BUSINESS BUT THEIR OWN”, and continues, “Dates and places of birth relating to myself given in various works of reference are invariably false.” Paul Rapoport relates a couple of further examples of Sorabji deliberately attempting to mislead people, including himself, as to his true age. He concludes that this was ultimately related more to aspects of astrology and the Occult concerning his date of birth, rather than any desire to hide his actual age itself (Paul Rapoport, “Sorabji: A Continuation”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 59–66).

¹⁰ Clinton Gray-Fisk was a friend of the composer’s, as well as the dedicatee of Toccata No. 3.

Myths Concerning Sorabji As A Performer

The problems caused by unsubstantiated or conflicting reports concerning Sorabji and his work may be seen elsewhere as well, and it is this inability to distinguish the precise nature of the facts in some cases that makes understanding some of the particulars of his life so difficult. One such grey area concerns Sorabji's skill as a pianist, and so, in turn, his ability to present his own work. This is worth examining because of the light that it sheds on his attitudes towards his own music and critics of it. It also casts some doubt on judgements that were made by both his critics and supporters in the 1920s and 30s.

Referring to rumours that were apparently circulating in 1928 Sorabji wrote:

Others will declare one cannot play one's own works, and that one writes impossibilities. Luckily this had been said sometimes in front of people who know the contrary, and their lie had been exposed in their face . . . another declares that when one plays one's works the notes have no connection whatever with what one has written. This remark was made by one "modernistic" musician who was also unable to discover any main theme *at all* in my first Sonata, a work which is built up around a theme which is enunciated with such clarity and emphasis, and which is woven into almost every single bar of the music with more or less obviousness that a confession of inability to find it is like being unable to find or hear the *Dresden Amen* in "Parsifal".¹¹

A few months later he added:

The fable that my works, particularly my pianoforte works, are unplayable, and that I cannot play them myself, is industriously propagated by those with whom the wish is both illegitimate father and mother to the thought. That it is quite untrue, and that I myself, who makes no pretensions at all as a pianist, *can* play them, as plenty of people, including, Sir, your admirable self, as you bore witness in the *Musical Times* of September 1922, can vouch, does not, of course, affect the fable in the least.¹²

¹¹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music", The New Age, 24 May 1928, 44.

¹² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Le Jardin Parfumé", The Musical Times 69 (1 December 1928): 1120.

The first of these extracts comes from an account of some of Sorabji's personal experiences of the prejudices of people in the music business—this being inspired by the issues in Ethel Smyth's book A Final Burning of Boats. The second was a response to a review of the published score of Le Jardin Parfumé.¹³ What they have in common is contempt for the snap judgements and generalisations that he felt were typical of those who criticised his music. What he is in effect saying here is that because his critics' judgements were not reliable in one matter (such as the inability to divine the structural procedures in the First Piano Sonata) they were also not to be trusted in others. In this respect the specific question of his performing abilities is here of lesser importance than the issue of general playability. However, its true significance becomes apparent when related to the comments that were to be made in later years about his playing, and also to the Tobin controversy.

It is useful to compare these criticisms of Sorabji with the similar observations made by Michael Habermann nearly fifty years later. Habermann's comments arose as a result of listening to the private recordings that the composer made for Frank Holliday; in particular that of Le Jardin Parfumé.¹⁴ He wrote to Sorabji concerning this recording and received the following response:

You say in your kind letter of 22nd. that you perceived marked liberties and deviations in performance (by self) of my JARDIN PARFUMÉ. I don[']t doubt it for ONE MOMENT! I am not . . . repeat N O T a pianist and make no pretensions to being one. I get over the ground in my own music, and within my limitations EMPHATIC AND DECIDED as they are claim to give no more than a bird[']s eye view of the music. Such liberties as I take—and who has better right to do so than myself in my own music?—are dictated by the conditions of my fingers at

¹³ London: J. Curwen and Sons Ltd., 1927.

¹⁴ These were made in Sorabji's home between 1962 and 1968. More details can be found in Appendix 2 ("The Recordings of Sorabji's Music") of Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 480–85.

any particular time when I was recording; then I modify and alter AS SUITS ME. That's all there is to it. The music as printed embodies my INTENTIONS.¹⁵

The most obvious caveat when considering the significance of these recordings is that they were made long after Sorabji had given up practising the piano or taking any interest in the act of performance; he was by now in his seventies. We would not ordinarily expect them to provide a comprehensive record of his abilities as a performer at the time when he was still presenting his music in public. To find the same criticisms being levelled at his playing at this earlier time as were made in relation to his private recordings is therefore critical, since it suggests that the Holliday recordings are perhaps more representative of his playing than we might otherwise have thought—at least in terms of style and approach, if not strength and dexterity. For example, when he talks about his “limitations” is Sorabji referring to his abilities as a pianist in general (i.e., throughout his entire life), or does he mean just at the time when this set of recordings was being made? His admission that he is not a pianist suggests that he is speaking generally, but it remains an important distinction that requires some clarification, especially in the light of the vehemence with which he defended his ability to perform his own music in the 1920s.

The nature of Sorabji's reputation as a performer in the 1920s and 30s is a particularly intriguing one, for who at that time was in a position to determine whether his concerts presented accurate realisations of the scores? Such criticisms could hardly have been applied with any authority to the performances of his more important works (Piano Sonata No. 4, *Djami*, *Opus clavicembalisticum*, and Toccata No. 2) that he gave under the auspices of Erik Chisholm's Active Society for the

¹⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Michael Habermann, 28 February 1972, quoted in Habermann, “Sorabji's Piano Music”, in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 362.

Propagation of Contemporary Music: all of these works remained in manuscript (Opus clavicembalisticum being published in the year following the premiere¹⁶). Few people would have had the opportunity to examine these manuscripts; fewer still would have had sufficient knowledge to tell whether, and to what extent, he deviated from them in his performances.¹⁷ Indeed, Opus clavicembalisticum received its first public airing less than six months after the completion date given in the manuscript. One can't help wondering whether even Sorabji had sufficient time to prepare it for the concert—a point that will be examined in more detail below.

Nevertheless, these works were all performed *after* 1928, when Sorabji's complaints appeared in print. Of those that he had performed up to this point, the First Piano Sonata had been published in 1921, while the Second had appeared in print in 1923.¹⁸ At least some of those few performances that Sorabji gave of these works predated these publications. This meant that—as with the Active Society concerts—not only did the public not have any visual access to the scores, but also that the composer himself had to rely on playing from his manuscripts (he strongly advised against playing his works from memory).¹⁹ However, even on those occasions where

¹⁶ London: J. Curwen and Sons Ltd., 1931.

¹⁷ The person most obviously in a position to judge in these cases would, of course, have been a page-turner, although it is debatable whether even one experienced with contemporary scores would have been equipped to follow a messy, and often inaccurate, manuscript *and* assess how competently it was realised.

¹⁸ London: London and Continental Music Publishing Co. Ltd., 1921; London: F. and B. Goodwin Ltd., 1923.

¹⁹ A note in the autograph manuscript of Piano Concerto No. 5 states: “No attempt at the memorization of the solo part is to be made by the pianist. The risks of disaster are too great and the pitfalls too many for the author to wish his executant to torture his brain with a task that the former would be the last to impose on anyone, and which he is, incidentally, quite incapable of accomplishing himself.” A similar

it would have been possible for someone to follow the performance in the published score, the relatively unfamiliar compositional idiom and complexity of the notation would have added to the difficulties of this task for all but the most well-trained and experienced eyes and ears. Busoni was in as good a position as anyone to comment on Sorabji's accuracy in performing Piano Sonata No. 1 for him in 1919—perhaps rather more so, considering his own experience as a composer, pianist, and pedagogue—but those letters of his that relate this occasion make no mention of any such problems.

In any case, even allowing for the availability of certain publications, Sorabji's name was hardly well-known at the time. As one critic put it in a review of Le Jardin Parfumé that was published at around the same time that Sorabji made his comments:

No information about Sorabji is vouchsafed in the new *Grove*; but in the dictionary published by Dent and Sons in 1924 it is remarked that the only public hearing of his works to be recorded up to that year were (1) at a London concert in November 1920, when Sorabji gave the first performance of one of his sonatas, (2) at a Paris concert in June 1921, when his three songs from Baudelaire and Verlaine were sung to his accompaniment, and (3) at a Vienna recital in November when he played two of his sonatas. Thus the general public cannot know of his music, nor yet the ordinary professional critic, or even the special members of the concert-virtuoso world; though Busoni, a little while before he died, spoke highly of Sorabji's music, and Cortot has offered to play the concertos.²⁰

It is ironic that the information given here concerning the Vienna recital should itself be inaccurate. Sorabji was not in Vienna at that time, although there is a brief reference to him playing Piano Sonata No. 2 privately for a friend, perhaps

admonishment in Piano Sonata No. 2 warns that he “severely deprecates . . . all attempts at playing the work from memory, an impossible feat. The author asks of his executant an act of interpretation and not a demonstration of a certain popular system of mental training.”

²⁰ Grew, 85.

unsatisfactorily;²¹ presumably the Vienna concert of 13 January 1922, at which Sorabji played the First and Second Sonatas, was what was meant. Within the time-scale relevant to the present context, only one further concert may be found: at the Contemporary Music Centre, London, on 13 May 1924, at which Sorabji performed Piano Sonata No. 2. It therefore follows that if the majority of the public and the music profession were unaware of the existence of Sorabji's music they would be equally unaware as to the extent, if at all, to which he deviated from his own scores, either manuscripts or publications.

Whether they were familiar with his scores or not, Sorabji was rarely impressed by the critical faculties of those who attended his performances—such as that of the First and Second Sonatas in 1922. Apart from his May 1928 tirade, this may be guessed from the robust account of this event that he provided in a subsequent letter to Philip Heseltine,²² but is even more apparent from a recollection later in life that arose in a different context:

I vividly recall an incident from my own youthful days as a composer when invited to the studio of an artist friend to play to him and several musician friends some recent works of my own. One of those present was a very well-known and distinguished organist. I was drawn on one side by one of the company and warned not to be upset or put out at anything that the organist might say, that one must not expect anything much in the way of musical intelligence or insight into unfamiliar ways of thinking on the part of such as he. "Old H. G. is a church organist, you know, and well,—you know what *they* are like. . . . Stick-in-the-muds and all the rest. . . ." Well, it turned out in the event that "old H. G., the stick-in-the-mud conventional organist" was the *one* person present to make any really intelligent and percipient comment upon my work, a fact of which I was,

²¹ "Kaik[h]osru played to me his 2nd Sonata last Sunday and occasioned me acute distress. Being one of them stoics I showed no sign of what I was undergoing." (Cecil Gray to Philip Heseltine, December 1921, quoted in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 238).

²² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 19 June 1922, quoted in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 242.

naturally, at pains to remind them after their mockery and ridicule of “church organists” in general and “old H. G.” in particular.²³

Moreover, it was “old H. G.” (otherwise known as Harvey Grace) to whom he had appealed in the December 1928 letter-to-the-editor quoted above (“I myself . . . *can* play them, as plenty of people, including, Sir, your admirable self, as you bore witness in the *Musical Times* of September 1922, can vouch.”)—he was clearly referring once again to this particular event. However, as we saw in chapter 1, it was also Harvey Grace who had stated, in his review of Piano Sonata No. 2:

The music is . . . of such complexity that mental hearing of it is impossible save in brief passages; and a painful reading of it at the keyboard is useless, because music so dissonant cannot be judged when played at any but its rightful speed, when the various conflicting elements fall into place instead of sticking out.²⁴

This being the case, one can’t help wondering if he was any better equipped to assess Sorabji’s faithfulness to the score, even if the result sounded convincing as a piece of music; could he have judged whether Sorabji was a good pianist or a better improviser?

For the other major hurdle, evident from the comments of Grace and others (such as the blundering critic of Piano Sonata No. 1), was that it was difficult to understand the music or perceive how it was supposed to sound without an “inside knowledge” (so to speak) that of necessity only the composer himself could possess. The compositional style would inevitably have been more unfamiliar to contemporary commentators compared with those today who can consider it within the context of

²³ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “E. Emlyn Davies: a Personal Tribute”, *Musical Opinion* 74 (September 1951): 673.

²⁴ Grace, “New Music”, *The Musical Times* 65 (1 June 1924): 520. For a more detailed discussion of this type of problem—by no means exclusive to Sorabji—see Cook, 200–202.

the entire twentieth century. Since it was clearly not the sort of music that could be appreciated at the slower tempo required for someone attempting to pick out the notes, and inevitably no critic would have been prepared to invest the time necessary to overcome the purely technical difficulties that would enable them to appreciate how the work really sounded, the composer's own performances became vital. Whatever technical shortcomings he might or might not have had, he knew his compositional intentions and so had a better chance of reproducing these in performance than any pianistically inclined critic, or even any professional who had not studied the work for a considerable period of time. Even so, the unfamiliarity of the idiom made it all too easy to make bold claims as to the quality or incompetence of Sorabji's playing without ever being able to provide evidence to back them up.²⁵

While unidentified critics were busy spreading rumours that he could not play his own work, a number of Sorabji's friends remained convinced of his stature as "a virtuoso pianist of international standards."²⁶ There are also the similarly positive

²⁵ Significantly, one of the already quoted passages, in which Sorabji complains about the rumours about his playing, goes on to undermine the reliability of his critics by providing just such an example of unsubstantiated criticism: "The reviewer of one of our biggest dailies, being, as I discovered later, almost completely ignorant of the subject and having but indifferent knowledge of the language, once questioned the accuracy of my observance of French prosody, a matter on which I have received the highest compliments from the most distinguished French composers and musicians, who are notoriously scrupulous in this matter. Being unable to answer my challenge to show where and how the alleged offences were to be found, this gentleman took refuge in vague generalities about the conflict between poetry and music—he had not my songs by him at the moment, but would take an early opportunity of returning to the matter. Needless to say, he never did; it is now some four years ago . . . but, from that time till now, during which several of my largest and most important works have been issued, all of which have been duly sent, as always, for review, these have all been totally ignored." (Sorabji, "Le Jardin Parfumé", 1120.)

²⁶ Norman Peterkin. "A Note on Kaikhosru Sorabji", program note for a concert given by Yonty Solomon at the Wigmore Hall, London, 7 December 1976,

accounts that have already been mentioned in chapter 1. All that these differing reports prove is that his playing was neither sufficiently good nor sufficiently bad to lead a majority to a common viewpoint.

Nevertheless, despite this lack of reliable documentary evidence or recordings it may at least be possible to deduce the likely state of affairs surrounding the most important of Sorabji's public performances from certain associated circumstances. The importance of this concert derives not only from the stature of the work involved—Opus clavicembalisticum—but also from the fact that it is the only one that may be compared to some extent with a performance given by someone other than the composer in roughly the same period. This other performance was the one given by John Tobin in 1936 that brought much opprobrium upon the heads of performer and composer alike.²⁷ However, one might just as easily cast doubt upon the competence of Sorabji's own presentation by examining the circumstances surrounding it.

It is here that the limited time between the completion of Opus clavicembalisticum and its first performance becomes significant. Sorabji had roughly five months to bring the piece up to performance standard; a little more if he was practising parts of it as he was composing. This would seem to be less than ideal: in his discussion of his approach to and performances of this work Geoffrey Douglas Madge implies that he took rather longer in his initial preparations, including several preliminary weeks when he studied the score without playing a note.²⁸

quoted in Hinton, "Sorabji: An Introduction", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 36.

²⁷ Tobin's performance of Part I of Opus clavicembalisticum took place in London, at the Contemporary Music Centre, Cowdray Hall, on 10 March 1936.

²⁸ Geoffrey Douglas Madge, "Performing *Opus clavicembalisticum*", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 391. Although it was more than twenty years before

Taking a pragmatic view of the situation, we may consider what other activities were occupying Sorabji's attention during this time. Highest on his list of priorities was undoubtedly more composition. He had already set aside work on *Organ Symphony No. 2* in order to complete Opus clavicembalisticum, but he now started yet another major score—Symphony II for Piano, Large Orchestra, Organ, Final Chorus, and Six Solo Voices—which had apparently been promised to Erik Chisholm.²⁹ Opus clavicembalisticum had been completed on 25 June 1930, and at the time Sorabji reported his extreme exhaustion and need for rest and recuperation.³⁰ Despite this, he began work on the manuscript of Symphony II on 1 July, revealing what might appear to be almost an addiction to composition.³¹

Symphony II was never completed in its intended orchestral form. However, the solo piano part *was* finished, and this is self-sufficient to the point of forming a complete work in its own right. Even this reduction of the original conception is massive (333 pages in landscape format), and considering its size it was written out remarkably quickly: between 1 July 1930 and 18 June 1931. This would suggest that during this period the attention Sorabji lavished on it was comparable to the time he

Madge performed it in public, he presented the complete work privately in the early 1960s.

²⁹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Epistle dedicatory", Trois poèmes du "Gulistan" de Sa'di, April 1930, quoted in Rapoport, "'Could you just send me a list of his works?'" in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 131.

³⁰ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Erik Chisholm, 25 June 1930, quoted in Paul Rapoport, "Sorabji's Other Writings", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 310–11.

³¹ This is also suggested by the curious phrase, "by the time I had realized what I was doing I could not stop myself" (quoted in Polkinhorn's account, above), as well as Gray-Fisk's comment that "having once started, he found that he *had* to continue" (see above).

devoted to the writing out of Opus clavicembalisticum. When one considers in addition the feelings of emotional stress and exhaustion that appear to have accompanied this process (and there is no reason to suppose that Symphony II was any different from Opus clavicembalisticum in this respect) it becomes almost inconceivable to suppose that he was also spending significant periods of time rehearsing Opus clavicembalisticum—at least not in any systematic manner.

Another clue to a lack of significant rehearsal of Opus clavicembalisticum may be found in the state of the autograph manuscript. This is a typical example of Sorabji's œuvre in that it contains a number of errors, ambiguities, and omissions that affect various aspects of the notation—this general state of affairs being discussed in more detail in the next chapter. If he had indeed been practising the work, either during composition or afterwards, we might expect most or all of these to be corrected or clarified. Perhaps fingerings might have been added or even certain passages rewritten to be more effective. It was not Sorabji's custom to include such details as part of his normal compositional procedure, but we might expect him to have been more discriminating in presentation, knowing that he would have to perform the work in public.³²

Even if one excludes the various problems to be found within the manuscript of Opus clavicembalisticum it must be remembered that Sorabji was performing from a handwritten score, which—even though it was made by himself and is by no means

³² These same observations could, of course, be applied as well to the other works he performed for the Active Society: Djami, Piano Sonata No. 4, and Toccata No. 2. These are all comparable to Opus clavicembalisticum in the lack of subsequent editorial intervention on the part of the composer. Even the publications of those works that he performed earlier—most obviously Le Jardin Parfumé—are often just as careless in notation.

the most untidy of his autographs—would undoubtedly have posed problems of legibility, especially under the stress of a concert performance.³³ Any problems involving the notation, even otherwise accurate passages that were poorly aligned, would also become more challenging under the conditions of a live performance. As we have seen, it would have been out of the question for him to attempt to perform from memory. Moreover, he found performing in public at least as emotionally taxing as composing; almost certainly rather more so.³⁴

To look at the situation slightly differently, the pianist Egon Petri (who would undoubtedly have been Sorabji's first choice to perform Opus clavicembalisticum) never had the time to prepare the work for concert due to his commitments as a full-time performer, despite a long-standing wish to do so.³⁵ Sorabji, on the other hand, was a full-time composer. It is improbable that he was ever as skilled at the keyboard as Petri, no matter what reports have been made as to the former's abilities. It would also be rash to conclude that because Tobin was unequal to the demands of Sorabji's music the composer was the only person who could ever manage it. As the music critic of The Glasgow Herald pointed out, in his review of Sorabji's performance of Piano Sonata No. 4, "his facility at the keyboard is extraordinary [but] it is difficult to believe that some other virtuoso could not play it also."³⁶ Sorabji's technique might

³³ For the page-turner also, raising the potential for mishaps still further!

³⁴ Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 79.

³⁵ Petri, a pupil of Busoni, was a friend of Sorabji's and also dedicatee of Sequentia cyclica super "Dies irae" ex Missa pro defunctis. Sorabji had presented him with a copy of the score of Opus clavicembalisticum in 1932.

³⁶ Our Music Critic, "Sorabji—Composer and Pianist: Recital in Glasgow", The Glasgow Herald, 2 April 1930, 8.

have been “extraordinary” but it would be far-fetched to consider it unique (especially if his own modest protestations were to be believed). If a professional pianist such as Petri could not bring the work up to a performance standard due to pressure of work, then there is little reason to believe that Sorabji could either.

It will be noted that these points ignore the issue of the duration of Sorabji’s premiere. This is something of a myth in its own right. For a long time it was apparently accepted that Opus clavicembalisticum took approximately two and a half hours to perform, and, by extension, it was assumed that this was indeed the appropriate duration for the piece.³⁷ The source for this figure is probably the analytical note that Sorabji included in his manuscript, which describes how the work “continues the task of my contribution to the theory (my own) of ‘one programme one work’ which it still further extends occupying the length of a full ordinary programme (2½ hours approximately) for its performance.”³⁸

In the absence of more precise documentary evidence it is perhaps not surprising if this figure has been taken as definitive. The programme notes for the concert, which were written by Erik Chisholm and printed in The Scottish Musical Magazine, inform us that “the work is played in three sections, with intervals of 5–10 minutes between the parts, lasting 2¾–3 hours in performance.” On the other hand, the music critic of The Glasgow Herald had this to report:

³⁷ For example, this is the figure that appears in Ronald Stevenson’s book Western Music (London: Kahn and Averill, 1971), 203. This is interesting, bearing in mind that John Ogdon had given a private performance of the entire work at Stevenson’s home in December 1959.

³⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Shortform-Analysis of Opus Clavicembalisticum”, ed. Chris Rice, liner notes for Kaikhosru Sorabji, Opus clavicembalisticum, John Ogdon (Altarus, AIR-CD-9075(4), 1989), 22.

The work was played last night with two intervals of ten minutes or more, and occupied altogether a little over two hours. The programme notes announced that the performance would take two and three-quarters to three hours. There was the same notable discrepancy in the case of the fourth sonata between the time announced for performance and the time actually taken: and the conclusion would seem to be that Mr Sorabji plays his music faster than he intends to, being perhaps, as a pianist, somewhat under the domination of his marvellous technic.³⁹

As suggested here, Opus clavicembalisticum is by no means the only work to generate some confusion as to duration. Apart from the case of Piano Sonata No. 4 referred to above (and which is not in fact mentioned in this critic's actual review of the concert),⁴⁰ the original duration of 55–60 minutes stated in the autograph of Piano Sonata No. 2 was later replaced by "40 minutes" (after Sorabji had performed it?). Even allowing for variance caused by the subjective response of different critics,⁴¹ it appears ever more likely that Sorabji consistently rushed his performances, perhaps through anxiety.

Nevertheless, the various observers are by no means blameless when it comes to the propagation of myths and half-truths. Apart from the question of timings, even the details of the intermissions of the Opus clavicembalisticum premiere have been cast into doubt. In contrast to The Glasgow Herald, Kenneth Derus—speaking second-hand—informs us that:

³⁹ Our Music Critic, "Sorabji in Glasgow—Active Society Recital: 'Opus Clavicembalisticum'", The Glasgow Herald, 2 December 1930, 6.

⁴⁰ Our Music Critic, "Sorabji—Composer and Pianist", 8.

⁴¹ Alistair Hinton has noted the discrepancies in reported durations for Yonty Solomon's premiere of Piano Sonata No. 3 at the Wigmore Hall in 1977: ranging from 65 minutes to 90 minutes (Hinton, "Sorabji: An Introduction", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 42). Sorabji himself described it as "a gehenna like work of some hour and a quarter's duration" (Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 19 June 1922, quoted in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 245).

According to legend, Sorabji left the stage at the end of Part I, drank some Scotch whisky, said ‘let’s get on with it,’ and resumed playing while the audience was still getting up for the first intermission. He played straight through to the end, soaked like a rat in perspiration, whereupon it was necessary to wrap him up in blankets.⁴²

Chris Rice appraises the factual discrepancies thus:

In an article in [The Glasgow Herald] five years later, Chisholm (who turned pages at the performance) said that the performance lasted “more than 2½ hours with intervals”. However, Chisholm’s sister (who was at the performance) and the composer (who gave it) both stated unequivocally that no intervals took place.⁴³

With even such basic factual elements in doubt we are led to the uncomfortable conclusion that none of the primary sources (let alone the second-hand reports and rumours) for this event may be taken as gospel. At the same time, while one might argue—quite correctly—that all this provides little in the way of definite documentary evidence as to Sorabji’s performing abilities at that time, it does at least suggest that there was some substance to the rumours of incompetent, or at least rushed and sloppy, interpretations.⁴⁴ Moreover, when considered in conjunction with the undoubtedly wayward approach to the later private recordings made for Chisholm and Holliday, as well as the equally careless attitude suggested by the nature of his music notation and his typed correspondence (see chapters 3, 4, and 6) one can’t help further doubting the achievements lauded by some of his friends.

Knowledge of the way in which Sorabji played, and the competence with which he performed his works, is more important than might initially be supposed because

⁴² Kenneth Derus, “Kaikhosru Sorabji and *Opus clavicembalisticum*”, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Opus clavicembalisticum, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, (BIS, BIS-CD-1062/64, 1999), 5.

⁴³ Sorabji, “Shortform-Analysis”, ed. Rice, 22–23n.

⁴⁴ Our Music Critic, ““Opus Clavicembalisticum””, 6.

of the particular problems presented to both the public and the critics of the time. These are partly the result of the unfamiliar compositional idiom, but also an inability to penetrate the technical difficulties of the writing itself—such as the physical demands and rhythmic complexities—to gain an insight into how it was actually meant to sound. For if Sorabji was indeed playing no more than approximations—a “bird’s-eye view”—then it becomes clear that contemporary judgements were unwittingly based purely on an instrumental performance that might or might not be more improvisation than realisation, as is the case with the private recordings made in the 1960s for Erik Chisholm and Frank Holliday. This is borne out in those reviews that criticised the music for containing little variety of texture or dynamic—complaints that are self-evidently unjustified, as the scores themselves reveal—or for belying the structural contrast and interest promised by programme notes.⁴⁵ What makes the situation more complex is that even if Sorabji was better equipped to perform his music in the 1920s and 30s we have no knowledge of how he dealt with obstacles like the many mistakes and ambiguities already present in his manuscripts (and publications). Such factors would inevitably have had an effect on the performance, and the ways in which they were resolved—if at all—would have influenced the sound of the work and the degree of deviation from the previously thought-out structure.

The fact that similar criticisms were made of his playing in the 1920s and 30s as of the later private recordings is therefore suggestive for two reasons:

1. It might be seen as reflecting the ongoing problems of notation to be found throughout Sorabji’s output.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

2. It confirms that he consistently couldn't or wouldn't find the time to practise sufficiently to bring his works to a performing standard (which would include the identification and correction of potential notational troublespots beforehand). Instead, he relied on a keyboard dexterity achieved in his youth (which would explain why so many friends and other observers commented on his "miraculous" technique),⁴⁶ and an ability to improvise his way out of trouble. This becomes more plausible when considered in conjunction with certain other reports: for instance, his apparent dislike of people standing by him while he played the piano, where they could potentially check his accuracy.⁴⁷ However, it is not clear whether such paranoia was a pre-existing aspect of his character, or whether it arose as a reaction to the allegations and rumours that he complained about in 1928.

Myths Concerning Sorabji's Abilities As A Composer

Another similar, yet potentially more important, myth concerns Sorabji's abilities as a composer; more specifically, that he composed—at high speed—straight into the score, without reference to sketches, *and without making any mistakes*. Unsurprisingly, this may occasionally be found juxtaposed with descriptions of the highly complex nature and great length of many of his works.⁴⁸ The true nature of his writing will be examined in some depth in the following chapter, using detailed

⁴⁶ Alistair Hinton, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Organ Symphony No. 1, Kevin Bowyer (Continuum, CCD1001/2, 1988).

⁴⁷ Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 82.

⁴⁸ For example, see Philip Heseltine, "Music", The Weekly Westminster Gazette, 18 August 1923, 14–15; also Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 247.

examples from the manuscripts and publications themselves. The purpose here is to consider how such inappropriate generalisations might have arisen, particularly—largely due to the ban and Sorabji’s own intransigence—in the absence of any other informed reports, and to demonstrate their inaccuracy using the composer’s own written comments. This demystification of the compositional process will form the first step towards a more objective assessment of the composer’s methods and abilities.

The myth of Sorabji’s compositional legerdemain relies heavily on speculation as to the manner in which he composed. As with his pianistic abilities there is little in the way of verifiable detail: the composer himself was notoriously reluctant to divulge information on the subject. To some extent explanations have therefore relied upon extrapolation of related facts from other contexts; at least some of these have been tempered by what appears to be too slavish a reverence for the composer.

Of particular interest are the thoughts expressed by Sorabji in the chapters “Yoga and the Composer” and “Metapsychic Motivation in Music” from his 1947 collection of essays Mi Contra Fa.⁴⁹ These discuss issues relating to Yoga and the Occult respectively. In “Metapsychic Motivation in Music” he points to impressions of the supernatural that appear in the music of composers such as Berlioz, Liszt, and Alkan, as well as the demonic ability of Busoni to subsume the work of other composers in the creation of his transcriptions. By contrast, “Yoga and the Composer” takes as its starting point an article of the same name by Ernest Newman, and goes on to consider the discipline and avoidance of distraction required in order to compose. These two topics appear to have been linked by other people, firstly by the temptation

⁴⁹ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 71–75, 193–216.

to assign motivation to the imagery associated with certain compositions (the “programmaticism” that Sorabji found so irritating—see below), despite his warnings on the subject; and secondly by the construction of a moral commentary, particularly in comparison to the composer’s friend Philip Heseltine.

We will first demonstrate the allure of these themes for certain writers, including the composer himself, and then suggest how together they may have contributed to a fanciful account of Sorabji’s compositional *modus operandi*. It is clear that in certain cases too much has been read into the interests and beliefs that lie behind many of his works. This has ultimately led—as has been the case with some other composers—to a degree of romanticisation of the compositional act.

Like Rachmaninov, Sorabji displays a fondness for using the “Dies Irae”, either in a fragmentary form or an extended quotation. More often than not its appearance carries overtones of black magic and the supernatural: Sorabji’s conception of it is usually more akin to its treatment in the final movement of Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, although it does occasionally act as little more than a starting point for thematic variation.⁵⁰ The most obvious examples of large-scale manipulation of the theme, the Variations and Fugue on “Dies Irae” and Sequentia cyclica super “Dies irae” ex Missa pro defunctis, by and large fall into this category. The only obvious allusions are the funeral march from Sequentia cyclica (movement No. 16; a very

⁵⁰ Sorabji draws particular attention to this macabre example: “Hector Berlioz, one of the greatest of Liszt’s contemporaries, shared to a less degree the latter’s predilection for the eerie, the diabolical and the eldritch. The *Symphonie Fantastique* contains two of the finest pieces of musical devilment in existence, ‘The March to the Scaffold’ and ‘The Dream of a Witches’ Sabbath’.” (Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 203.)

unusual genre for Sorabji) and the titling of the last seven variations of the earlier work after the Seven Deadly Sins.⁵¹

On other occasions he uses the “Dies Irae” more obviously to reflect the mood of the piece, even when it is also serving a structural purpose as a main theme, e.g., Piano Sonata No. 5 and “Quaere reliqua hujus materiei inter secretiora”. These two works have clear sinister connections: Piano Sonata No. 5 (of which the eighth movement is a “Preludio-corale sopra ‘Dies Irae’”) is subtitled “Opus archimagicum”, and Sorabji freely admitted that it was inspired by the Tarot;⁵² “Quaere” is one of two works written after ghost stories by M. R. James (the other, St. Bertrand de Comminges: “He was laughing in the tower”, also quotes the “Dies Irae”, though less extensively).⁵³ Another, later, work, Toccata No. 4 also includes the “Dies Irae” in its fifth movement “Intermezzo secondo”. This interlude has been given the subtitle “Of a neophyte and how the Black Art was revealed to him”, perhaps inspired by the illustration by Aubrey Beardsley.

Perhaps at this point should be emphasised the difference between the use of imagery (and “character”) in these pieces and full-blown programmaticism. The latter

⁵¹ An autograph note is typical of Sorabji’s *laissez-faire* attitude in such cases: “The Seven last Variations are entitled after the Seven Deadly Sins: Don’t know if at all they typify!!” The music itself is superficially influenced (“Variation 61: *Inertia*” is sluggish in character, while “Variation 58: *Ira*” is rather more fiery), but there is clearly no committed attempt at any kind of programmaticism — something of which Sorabji was invariably scornful. It is more likely that he found titling these particular variations aesthetically satisfying, given their position within the work and the significance of the theme.

⁵² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, [Animadversions] Essay written about the author’s unpublished works, 1953, private collection, 5. Opus archimagicum was also originally dedicated to his friend Bernard Bromage, who was a member of an Occult order, The Fraternity of Inner Light.

⁵³ The short stories “Count Magnus” and “Canon Alberic’s Scrap-book”.

was always a *bête noir* of Sorabji's, and he took great pains to warn against reading too much into the descriptions or titles that he used in works such as Opus archimagicum, remarking that "he expressly disclaims any programmatic intention", and continuing, "neither he nor anyone else can have the temerity to pretend that any part of Opus Archimagicum can be tacked onto the Tarot as 'expressing' it, whatever that is supposed to mean."⁵⁴ Clearly, it can be seen why in this case he felt it appropriate to include references to the "Dies Irae", and, indeed, from the interest of himself and the dedicatee in such matters, why the Tarot itself should inspire him musically, but the piece itself is not the result of some kind ritual; nor is it, despite the implications of the structural titles, a "story" of a magical rite of passage.

In another, similar, case an extra-musical source of inspiration had a more direct influence on the actual structure of a particular work. Piano Symphony No. 1 "Tantrik" is divided into seven movements, each one named after one of the seven psychic energy centres (chakras) of the body. Revealingly, from the point of view of the influence that the imagery had on his compositional outlook, this appears to go against his original conception of the structure as suggested by the presence of certain markings crossed out in the manuscript (see chapter 5). In this case Sorabji felt the need to attach a warning to the work itself in one of the two misanthropic manuscript notes. One cannot help speculating what relevance this might have to his decision to cease publishing and performing his works (this piece dates from roughly the same period as his final public performance); the implication of the comments is that he expected the composition to be seen eventually by eyes other than his own.

⁵⁴ Sorabji, [Animadversions], 5, 6.

A crore of pestilences upon all literal fools who will go rushing off to the Libraries mugging up Tantra and getting the Hell of a kick out of the dirt, the vice and all the fleshly uncleanness that the pure ones can safely be relied on to find where and whenever they look for them, and having discovered what they will think they ought to look for (and enjoy finding above all else), will thenceforth run them to earth in my Symphony. Well: “à chacun son infini;” I wish them joy and no end of outsize kicks—at least as many and big as they would get if they were to look a little nearer home, into the maggotty middens of those wholly unchemical manure-heaps their minds.⁵⁵

The intensity of the imagery associated with Sorabji’s music certainly does make it tempting to imagine it spilling over into the physical process of composition, especially in the light of his known interests in Yoga, the Occult, and psychic issues in general. Indeed, it is not particularly uncommon for the spiritual elements “discovered” in a composer’s work to be bound into what amounts almost to a fairy-tale of creation. Sometimes a composer’s finished compositions, or even sketches, may be taken as a starting point for a romanticised perspective of their work that can be used as an argument for both their skill and their artistic integrity:

Beethoven . . . was a prolific sketch writer, filling many notebooks with fragments and sections which show considerable difference from the finished work. He often worked on a particular composition over a period of years. . . .

This feature of Beethoven’s compositional life has led some commentators to an over-romanticized view of Beethoven as a tormented genius struggling with intractable raw material to mould it into the service of higher art. Early commentators on the sketches offered them primarily as *moral* comment on the character of the composer. Johnson (1980) sees the classic transcriptions and commentaries of Nottebohm (1887) as concerned with “portraying the demonic opposition [. . . of the raw musical material] and leaving us to marvel at the spiritual power which eventually subdued it.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Envoi: or Epistle Denunciatory:”, Tantrik Symphony for piano alone (1938–39), quoted in Paul Rapoport, ““Could you just send me a list of his works””, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 187–88.

⁵⁶ John Sloboda, The Musical Mind (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 104; Douglas Johnson, Beethoven’s early sketches in the “Fischhof Miscellany,” Berlin Autograph 28 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Gustav Nottebohm, Zweite Beethoveniana, ed. Eusebius Mandyczewski (Leipzig: J. Reiter-Biedermann, 1887).

To be sure, we are looking back to a period with a less pragmatic outlook on music, yet despite—or perhaps because of—the lack of compositional drafts and sketches a similar romanticism has been applied to Sorabji's work.

It is well-known that Sorabji wrote out his pieces extremely quickly; this much at least is fact, as the dates on his manuscripts reveal, in conjunction with remarks to be found in his private correspondence (such as the letters written to Erik Chisholm during the writing of Opus clavicembalisticum). The difficulty, as far as some commentators are concerned, is how music not just of such frequent extreme length, but also such great complexity of texture, harmony, and structure came to be composed in such relatively short time-scales—especially without apparent reference to previously-prepared sketches or notes. Faced with this, some attempts at rationalisation have been made. The most interesting of these has been the suggestion that Sorabji composed using some kind of yogic technique, taking as a background his interest in Yoga and psychic phenomena, as well as the related imagery implicit in the works themselves. The propounder of this theory is Kenneth Derus, who explicitly connects it with Sorabji's moral character, especially by comparison with that of Philip Heseltine (and his alter-ego Peter Warlock):

What Sorabji was up to can be explained without recourse to the supernatural. When he composed, he pushed himself—physiologically—significantly beyond what even the most hyper-productive writer would call “white heat”, and he did so for reasons which have nothing to do with the creation of art. The techniques Sorabji employed were largely mechanical and have been well understood, in the East and the West, for thousands of years. They are best called Tantric; but here again, thinking in terms of stereotypes would be a mistake. The techniques themselves did not correspond in any macroscopic way to known Tantric ritual; but what resulted, in any case, was a condition of mind and body very much the opposite of that popularly called hypnotic. While in these yogic states, Sorabji wrote down his music *at unbelievable speed*: almost always without sketches, *without planning*, without looking ahead or back, and without blotting a note. *The*

music literally flew to the page, for all its great contrapuntal and organizational complexity.⁵⁷ [Italics all mine]

The last two sentences in particular are a good example of the stuff of which myths are made—for all that Derus tries hard to avoid “the supernatural” and the like. What is particularly irritating about an exposition of this nature is that while he makes impressive statements about “these yogic states” he doesn’t go into details concerning “the techniques themselves”. Moreover, in setting out to speak so authoritatively about Sorabji’s compositional *modus operandi*, Derus nevertheless fails to divulge his sources and evidence—surely of vital importance in a case such as this. If the composer was as coy about discussing the act of composition as other sources have suggested then where did the information come from?⁵⁸ Surely not from Sorabji, and who else would have been in a position to observe him at work and make such judgements?⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Derus, “Sorabji’s letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 246–47.

⁵⁸ Some of these sources are authoritative; for instance, Alistair Hinton, himself a composer, was one of Sorabji’s closest friends during the last couple of decades of his life.

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, there is little information on whether the act of composition was entirely private, or whether Sorabji permitted anyone to be present at the time; it seems most likely, judging from his attitudes towards privacy and composition, that it was a solitary activity. The only documented exception may be found in his article “Music . . . Delusions and Pathetic (or not so) Fallacies” (The European, February 1955, 41–44), which includes an anecdote concerning an electrician who was working in the same room while Sorabji was composing. In any case, the only person who would have been in a position to make regular observations—in the later years at least—would have been his companion Reginald Best. Best, a rather shadowy figure, seems to have shared Sorabji’s desire for privacy. However, to pique interest further, the chapter of Sorabji—A Critical Celebration from which Derus’s remarks are taken is headed by an introduction by the general editor, Paul Rapoport, stating that: “This chapter is the only one in the book besides Chapter 11 which Sorabji saw a version of, answered questions for, and commented on. He was extremely grateful to Derus for his work.”

Derus goes on to use the circumstances of Philip Heseltine's death to introduce an explicit moral commentary on Sorabji's character and manner of composition:

In Tantric Buddhism, yogic manipulations have clearly defined alchemical concomitants. Like Thomas and Rebecca Vaughan—locked in a Tantric embrace in the Pinner of Wakefield three centuries before—Sorabji is performing a chemical experiment, as he composes, in a way less metaphorical than commonly thought. His partner—his *soror mystica*—is his art. They balance each other perfectly. People who do this sort of thing usually come to bad ends, for reasons which can be understood in straightforward medical terms. The Vaughans were careful, intelligent, and devout—but disciplined and dangerous gymnastics of the spirit ultimately killed them. That Sorabji has survived into his tenth decade [he lived to be 96] is less a tribute to his skill than a tribute to his moral integrity. The yogic texts of several cultures are all very clear about his. Overriding unselfishness is an essential pre-condition for avoiding catastrophe. That a man so outwardly ferocious could be inwardly gentle, generous, and filled with kindly good humor is hardly surprising. Had he been otherwise, he would have perished a long time ago—in some equivalent of a laboratory experiment.⁶⁰

Similarly:

Lovers can be calisthenically mismatched, for Tantric purposes, and in a similar way artists can fail to balance their art. Peter Warlock was an outsized Tantric work of art. He exercised Heseltine with routinized but awkward physical and moral vigour. The chemical consequences were lethal and in one sense murderous. States of mind mediate brain chemistry, and conversely. But the states of mind and body that result from mismanaged yogic activity leave diminished scope for volition. At best they can be entreated, not willed. This explains the Tantric tradition of personifying material and mental capacities. Genuine entreaties engage genuine persons. Stereotyped yogic manoeuvres ensure that the same consequent persons keep coming back, throughout history, frequently with the worst of intentions.⁶¹

So it seems that Sorabji was able to compose in the way that he did because of his moral integrity; hence the implication that his music was an expression of his character. This might be true for any composer, but rarely are a composer's morals,

⁶⁰ Derus, "Sorabji's letters to Heseltine", in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 249–50.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 250*n.*

his manner of composition, and the compositions themselves all bound together in such a romanticised way.

There is a certain similarity of approach between Derus's remarks and the account of Clinton Gray-Fisk's concerning Sorabji's compositional beginnings. While clearly not setting out to mislead, both phrase their writing in such a way as to ensure that the nature of his work is regarded with an appropriate reverence. This is also apparent when we compare Derus's two most contentious sentences with Philip Heseltine's much older account:

While in these yogic states Sorabji wrote down his music at unbelievable speed: almost always without sketches, without planning, without looking ahead or back, and without blotting a note. The music literally flew to the page, for all its great contrapuntal and organizational complexity.⁶²

His music is written down, without any preliminary sketches, bar by bar into the fair copy; there is no improvisation or use of the piano at any stage of the composition, nor is there any rewriting or alteration when a work is completed. This is all the more remarkable by reason of the fact that the texture of the music is of the utmost complexity both of harmony and rhythm.⁶³

The similarity in content is remarkable; did Derus base his comments on those of Heseltine or are both derived from a single source in Sorabji himself? If the latter is the case then we face a similar situation to the one illustrated at the beginning of the chapter. Not only has the earlier message been now been embellished—rather in the style of Gray-Fisk—but one can't help wondering whether Sorabji has once again been glossing over the facts, since he himself admitted that, as with the matter of his age, he found interest in such matters intrusive and embarrassing.

⁶² Ibid., 247.

⁶³ Heseltine, 14–15.

Throughout his life Sorabji was reluctant to discuss matters of compositional process or motivation: there are very few statements that actually deal with the nitty-gritty of the act of composition. The most important of these is an apparently spontaneous account contained within a private commentary on his own published works that he produced at the request of his friend Norman Gentieu. Interestingly, it appears to contradict aspects of the Derus statement:

The . . . only difficulty is to make the mental processes of composition[,] and the preliminaries thereunto[,] in the writer's case[,] reasonably intelligible, if that be possible, or at least to give a fair impression of what goes on in the composer's mind. A long process of thinking about the general outlines and shape of the work precedes by a very long time the "arrival" into the composer's mind of any of the musical "stuff" of the matter, which arrives on the scene last of all. It is then in a sort of way an unfolding in time and space, or rather in ink and on paper[,] what already exists in . . . one's mind.⁶⁴

The most significant point of departure between this account and that of Derus concerns the time-scale on which the compositional process took place. One of the key points implied by Derus is the spontaneity of the act ("without sketches, without planning, without looking ahead or back"). Sorabji, on the other hand, was equally concerned with emphasising the "long process" of planning and consideration that went into the design of the piece, even though the musical elements themselves (presumably themes, fugue subjects, etc.) apparently represented only the final stage (of planning). This is borne out in a reference to Symphony II, which he had apparently promised to his friend Erik Chisholm:

Ami très cher—this dedication is not by any | manner of means an attempt to fob you off what | we have agreed to call "your" Symphony, (that is, though | *still in germ*, irrevocably yours).⁶⁵ [My italics]

⁶⁴ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, A few further notes on the writer's published Compositions, 1953, private collection, 1.

⁶⁵ Sorabji, "Epistle dedicatory", quoted in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 131.

Sorabji did not begin writing out the Symphony until several months after this dedication.

It is clear that some clarification is necessary when referring to Sorabji “composing”. It would seem that what Derus is actually describing is one part *only*—the final part—of a long process: namely the act of writing down the music into the manuscript. As it stands, the clear implication resulting from the Derus statements is that he is referring to the *complete* process of composing a piece. As with Gray-Fisk, this approach (whether accidental or deliberate) has the advantage of making Sorabji’s skill and achievements appear remarkable—or “beyond normal”.

Further ambiguity may be found in the references to Yoga that play a major part in the Derus statements—this being an area of particular interest to Sorabji to the extent that he devoted an entire chapter of Mi Contra Fa to its exploration and assessment in relation to composition.

Mr Newman drew attention to the energy-tapping power that is conferred by various methods of Yoga, suggesting, and very rightly, how enormously helpful this would be, especially to composers, so many of whom are apt to be dependent upon what they—or their misguided admirers—are pleased to call their “inspiration”. That this foolish word does, in its etymological sense, express a profound truth—as far as artistic creation *in the earliest stage* is concerned—cannot I think be denied. The harm has arisen from that very sentimental and very popular conception of the artist who, at his greatest and best, is a very intense and hard thinker, swimming in inspiration, as Philip Heseltine used to say, like a fly in treacle, or the charwoman in a Guinness ecstasy. Of course, it never is and never has been done so, for all that the germinal idea, whence ultimately the complete work fructifies and develops, does seem to be of the nature of the “breathing-into”, the “inspiration” of which so much is heard. . . .

For the composer, then, the great importance of Yoga—after it has performed its functions of psychic catharsis and emotional metabolism—is that the power certain practices of its technique confer of commanding what is called inspiration, instead of causing him to be at the mercy of this wind which usually bloweth very much as and when, as well as where, it listeth, à propos, or, as likely as not, exceedingly mal-à-propos.⁶⁶ [My italics]

⁶⁶ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 72, 74.

In other words, Sorabji regarded it as the practice of mental discipline and concentration—nothing more; and certainly not as the catalyst of “those musical maunderings we are occasionally asked to accept as conscious and deliberate transcripts of a transcendental fourth dimensional music”.⁶⁷ His reference to “the earliest stage” of composition is significant in that it reflects the comments of his already quoted above.

That this kind of discipline was desirable to him is clear from the evidence of several sources that illustrate the struggle and emotional strain that composition—especially of the larger, more complex works—generated. The letters written by him to Erik Chisholm during the composition of Opus clavicembalisticum contain many references of this nature. We hear of headaches, “jangling nerves”, weariness, and, perhaps most significantly, insomnia:

I don't know what's happening to me . . . my rest grows steadily worse . . . ½ past three this morning before I got to sleep and wide awake again for good at ½ past six . . .

I'm one mass of jangling nerves all over—touch me anywhere and it sets my teeth on edge . . . my head aches—my eyes ache my back legs and arms ache . . . I'm an incarnate perambulating ache.⁶⁸

It is clear that the composition was preying on his mind, and, assuming that such circumstances were not uncommon for him (which is what is hinted in “Yoga and the Composer”⁶⁹), it is not surprising that he found the kind of discipline and focus

⁶⁷ Ibid., 75

⁶⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Erik Chisholm, 10 June 1930, quoted in Rapoport, “Sorabji's Other Writings”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 308.

⁶⁹ “To have a symphony germinating and simmering in your mind when all your attention and energies are required in making love (or what is more important, a good sauce!) and to have to abandon the making both of the sauce and the love because the symphony will not be denied, or being denied will not perhaps come

offered by Yoga highly attractive. This in turn is entirely consistent with other statements that make it clear that he regarded composition as more a matter of perspiration than inspiration—the latter once again being treated with the contempt he felt it deserved (note also the disdain with which he views any investigation of the compositional act):

Of all the matters on which the greatest nonsense is talked none has a greater abundance than what is called inspiration. Speaking for myself, I find not only acutely embarrassing but rather impertinent those probings, questings, and muckrakings in one's unconscious (that I believe is the correctly fashionable cant-phrase) as to what I was thinking (I never of course have the faintest notion) how I came to write (I never know that either) such-and-such a work. What any creative artist worthy of the name *can* say roundly is that in any large conception what is called "inspiration" plays to sheer hard work, hard thought and drudgery the proportion of one grain to one ton—if that be not too liberal an estimate on the side of the "inspiration" business. Consider for a moment the sheer mental effort of co-ordination and organisation involved in the writing of a great work like a Mahler Symphony—the last and greatest symphonies given to the world, the supreme and final development of the form, it seems to me. How much hard thought has to go to the mere writing down of the notes of such a work, when you bear in mind that some twenty or so of the instruments for which you write sound different notes from those you write for them, and that if you want such-and-such you must write different ones (a commonplace, this, of every score naturally, but increased ten-fold when you come to a score of the elaboration and intricacy of one of Mahler's, who was one of the greatest masters of the orchestra that have ever been known). Consider also that you have, at any given moment, to be able to hear, to pre-hear the vertical and horizontal effect of any particular passage and the whole, then ask yourself what "inspiration" has to do with all that as opposed to sheer hard—and very hard—thought. I recall an amusing incident some years ago in my flat in London. I was working on a very large score, of some forty staves to a page, in a room where an electrician was working. He paused for a moment to watch me, and remarked, "Ah, it must be jolly nice for you gents just sitting down and working when you feels like it wotever kums into yer 'eads." I looked at the creature for a moment, then I proceeded to tell him in words of one letter what exactly was involved in the sheer effort of memory of compass of instruments, their capacity in various registers, their power of blending with certain others, one's own power of inner hearing to realise or try, mentally, the effect of a certain combination of instruments before one set about writing one single note, and that before any of that one had to have had years and years of

again, is a deplorable state of affairs, unfortunately only too typical of the emotional and psychological chaos wherewith men and artists are wont to conduct their lives and minds." (Sorabji, *Mi Contra Fa*, 74).

hard study and preparation on top of innate ability. I flatter myself that I left him, as indeed I intended to do, a little shattered. I mention this incident as an illustration of one very prevalent popular delusion about the way the creative musician works, *i.e.*, jabbing down any old thing—the first thing—that comes into his head any old how.⁷⁰

Once again we can see that for Sorabji the act of composing was far from the high-speed creative outpouring implied by Derus and by no means unplanned.

However, the most important issue raised by Derus's interpretation is the matter of accuracy; that is to say, whether Sorabji composed "perfectly" and "completely" at the time, or whether there were passages that needed filling-out or correcting at a later date. To be fair, Derus does not make any explicit claims as to Sorabji's ability as a composer. There is nevertheless much implicit admiration of his compositional self-confidence and legerdemain. What we are apparently being led to believe is that Sorabji's music emerged perfectly formed, rather like Pallas Athene springing from the brow of Zeus. Once again, the well-intentioned motivation behind this statement is all too clear, but the documentary evidence contradicting it is equally unequivocal, as the detailed examination in the following chapter of the numerous problems in the scores will demonstrate.

Conclusion

By now it will have become clear that traditional accounts of Sorabji both as performer and composer have omitted an important factor: the presence of numerous problems and ambiguities within the published and unpublished scores themselves. This is somewhat controversial, as it is impossible to deny that even the greatest or most prolific of composers are occasionally beset by doubts, slips of the pen, and

⁷⁰ Sorabji, "Music . . . Delusions", 43–44.

misprints. A cursory glance at Sorabji's autographs does at first confirm what appears to be an extraordinary self-assurance. With remarkably few exceptions (most notably the unpublished and unnumbered Piano Sonata op. 7 of 1917) they appear to present a visually impressive continuity and integration of the writing, largely free from crossings-out and corrections. Bearing in mind that in the majority of cases these are the *only* manuscripts (accompanying sketches being even more scarce), this does indeed seem exceptional. However, a more thorough investigation of the autographs reveals a large number of genuine mistakes, usually in the notation, but also, occasionally, in the way the compositional elements fit together, or rather *don't*. To put this into perspective: given the volume of Sorabji's compositional output it would be truly remarkable if there were no mistakes to be found anywhere in his manuscripts; however, the sheer number involved—Kevin Bowyer reports “well over a thousand” in Organ Symphony No. 1 alone (which Sorabji permitted to be *published*)⁷¹—points to something more serious than occasional publication misprints or the composer's slips of the pen. Problems such as these raise two issues in particular:

1. Compositional: why did such mistakes (especially if of a recurring type) appear in the first place?
2. Editorial: why were they not corrected (by Sorabji) at a later date?

These questions will be examined in more detail in the following chapters.

⁷¹ Bowyer, 283.

CHAPTER 3

SPECIFIC ISSUES OF NOTATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter we refuted the suggestion that Sorabji's scores reveal no doubts or flaws. Moreover, comments by other writers (as illustrated in chapter 1) have pointed to numerous problems of inaccuracy and ambiguity. The majority of these are directly related to his treatment of notation, and what makes them so significant is that they are not limited to misprints in those editions that were issued during his lifetime. Although these publications—especially of the larger works, such as *Organ Symphony No. 1* and *Opus clavicembalisticum*—certainly introduce their own share of misprints, many of the inaccuracies have been copied straight from the autograph manuscripts.

The scale of these problems in Sorabji's manuscripts and published editions only started to become apparent with the ending of the unofficial ban on public performance of his music and the subsequent appearance of a number of recordings and concerts devoted to his work. These difficulties did not necessarily prove to be obstacles to playing the pieces: concerts given by Yonty Solomon and Michael Habermann (which included such error-ridden published scores as *Le Jardin Parfumé*—as well as various other works still in manuscript) attest to this. Similarly, the first complete performance of *Organ Symphony No. 1*, in the church of the Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, London, on 25 July 1987, by Kevin Bowyer and Thomas Trotter, took place without hitch.¹ However, after the concert Bowyer was approached

¹ For the concert the first and third movements were performed by Kevin Bowyer, while Thomas Trotter took the second.

by Chris Rice, who asked him to record the work for Altarus Records. It was then that the full extent of the problems affecting this particular score started to become apparent:

I already suspected that there were vast numbers of mistakes and misprints in the published score so preparation for the recording involved careful examination of a photocopy of the manuscript and also the composer's (badly) proof-read copy of the publication (he must have missed the copy deadline as none of his corrections were incorporated into the score as it was finally published). Altogether there are well over a thousand misprints in the 1925 publication. A revised and corrected edition emerged from all this work and it was this version that was recorded in April 1988 on the Harrison & Harrison organ of St. Mary Redcliffe, Bristol.²

Sorabji's inscription in the manuscript of Opus clavicembalisticum, which he gave to his friend Erik Chisholm, hints at similar difficulties:

For my dear Erik | with love from K | Xmas 1931. | and now he can amuse himself noticing | the innumerable discrepancies between the | published version and the manuscript | which ought to keep what he is pleased | to call his mind (!!?) well occupied | for a long time to come!³

Some of these “discrepancies” are evidently the result of revisions and improvements made by Sorabji during the publication process. Perhaps some of these even came about as a result of the composer's own première performance of the work in December 1930, but—as has been pointed out in chapter 2—the modifications are nevertheless rather fewer in number than might be expected, given the problems in the manuscript. Geoffrey Douglas Madge, who performed entire work a number of times, also played parts of the score for Sorabji and discussed aspects of it while he was preparing to present it in concert.

² Bowyer, 283.

³ This inscription, which does not replace the original dedication to Christopher Grieve / Hugh MacDiarmid, appears on the reverse of the title page in the manuscript. Chisholm certainly did spend some time studying it as the pages in Part I have many comments, mostly analytical, in his hand.

With his help I got a copy of the manuscript from the University of Cape Town. I spent quite a lot of time with it and discovered there were dubious notes and so on in both manuscript and printed score. I spoke to Sorabji about the first page, for instance—the chords which have an octave and a third in the printed score, but only octaves in the manuscript. He said to play it as it was in the printed edition, although I think that the reading in the manuscript would have more power. I must say that in general I like the printed version more. Sorabji probably revised and improved the manuscript for publication.⁴

Nevertheless, the number of misprints in the publication and various other problems in the autograph itself are legion—perhaps even greater in number than in Organ Symphony No. 1. Such difficulties are also not confined to those works that were eventually published.

The problems in Sorabji's scores are not all similar in nature. While many appear to have been caused by the speed at which he apparently wrote, others derive from the development of his notation in response to the evolution of his compositional style—particularly in the first half of the 1920s.

Sorabji's Notation In Context: Development And Usage

General Features

It is fair to say that at the outset of Sorabji's career he was following conventions of notation that had been standard throughout much of the nineteenth century (certain experiments by Liszt and others notwithstanding). By contrast, even

⁴ Geoffrey Douglas Madge, "Performing *Opus clavicembalisticum*", in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 397. This chapter takes the form of an interview of Madge, conducted by Paul Rapoport in several phases between 1984 and 1989. The composer went on to suggest some further alternative passages in his annotated "working copy" of the publication: for example, he adds optional octaves above and below the motto theme at the beginning of the work; he also provides an alternative ending to Part I, if the performance is to conclude at this point. This latter is particularly interesting as it points to Sorabji's apparent willingness to allow individual sections of the composition to be performed on their own—this being confirmed by Madge in his chapter.

at this early stage his music itself exhibits clear signs of the freedom (particularly of rhythm and metre) that were to become an essential characteristic of his writing. It is the tension between the relative inflexibility of the notation and the freedom and complexity of his style that is responsible for many of the problems to be found in his manuscripts; moreover, we can chart certain changes in his treatment of notation during the earlier years of his career when he was starting to develop an individual musical language.

His earliest extant score, the song “The Poplars” (dated 17 May 1915), is an attempt at creating a free declamatory style; here we find the first appearance of the familiar dotted barline, being used on this occasion to subdivide a 9/4 bar into units of 4/4 and 5/4. “Chrysilla”, written four days later, has no fewer than nineteen changes of time-signature during the course of its twenty-five bars. It is not surprising, therefore, that there is little sense that these changes in time signature are anything more than cosmetic. This becomes more evident in subsequent works as bars become longer and rhythmic relationships become increasingly complex—as in Piano Sonata No. 1, for example. In a note in the score of Piano Concerto No. 5 Sorabji stated that:

For the proper interpretation of this work it is necessary to maintain a steady smooth extra-musical flow, except in such places as the contrary is indicated by the character of the music; the bar lines and time signatures have no significance beyond serving as “guides âne” for the purposes of study, rehearsal, and synchronization between the soloist and the orchestra.

While this state of affairs may well have been more shocking to contemporary critics and musicians than it is today—which might help to explain the incomprehension with which much of Sorabji’s (available) music was greeted at the time—we can now see it as part of a general trend in twentieth century music:⁵

⁵ The somewhat parochial attitude displayed by many towards music at that

In twentieth-century music we no longer have inflexible time-signatures, unvarying barlines, or rigid four-measure phrases. Yet today “the tyranny of the barline” is just as strong as before—in exact reverse. In his eagerness to “fight the barline” the contemporary composer has felt compelled to alter the position of *every* barline, this very simple device for keeping time, to the point where it now indicates primary stress and pulsation only by coincidence. The notation of the *inner rhythm* is no more significant than the positioning of barlines.⁶

This problem of having to employ ever more complex and meaningless time signatures was one that Sorabji vanquished in the early 1920s: after Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue (1920, 1922) and Piano Sonata No. 2 (1920) he dispensed with them altogether, apart from some orchestral works, and isolated instances in the solo piano pieces that appear to have been used to help him keep track of the correct number of beats when adding individual parts of the texture.

Meanwhile, the inefficiency of Western notation at conveying his naturally complex harmonic idiom was also leading him to explore alternative methods of notating accidentals. Of course, he was not alone in floundering in this manifestation of the parallel crises of notation and tonality. The tortuous triple accidentals and enharmonic mixtures in the music of Roslavets (for instance) were clumsy and difficult to read, as was the “blunderbuss” approach taken by Schoenberg (and later

time may be seen in the review by Paul Bechert in the *Musical Courier* of Sorabji’s concert performance of his First and Second Piano Sonatas on 13 January 1922: “Mr. Sorabji, who lives in London, played his two piano sonatas, and frankness compels the statement that, at least on first hearing, they are absolutely beyond the grasp of ever so modern a hearer, who still expects from a composition such ancient things as form, rhythm and thematic or harmonic treatment of any kind . . . the feeling one derives from them is, in short, that compared to Mr. Sorabji, Arnold Schönberg must be a tame reactionary.” (Quoted in Derus, “Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 242.) Sorabji himself had already commented on the reaction of audiences and critics to Schoenberg’s music on an earlier occasion (Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 6 January 1914, quoted in Derus, “Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 204).

⁶ Gardner Read, Music Notation (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1978), 186–87.

others) in writing accidentals before *every* note.⁷ The alternative—notating accidentals only where absolutely necessary—was explored (briefly) by the likes of Busoni and van Dieren, and was potentially more practical and elegant.

Three main methods of notating accidentals may be found in Sorabji's output:

1. Key signatures (traditional notation).
2. No key signatures, but each accidental lasts for an entire bar unless cancelled by a natural.
3. "Accidentals hold good only for the notes in front of which they stand with the exception of repeated notes and tied notes".⁸

The first of these methods has little significance for the development of Sorabji's notation. The pieces that employ it are very much in the minority and include the various (piano) transcriptions that he made. Since in such cases he is basing his work on pre-existing music by another composer the original key signature is adhered to. This remains the case even in those transcriptions that were made later in his career: thus his 1922 version of Chopin's Valse in D \flat major, op. 64/1 (the infamous "Minute" Waltz) remains faithful to its five flats, despite the many chromatic twists and turns that subvert the original harmony; the later Schlußszene aus "Salome" is equally wedded to the key signatures that appear in the Strauss score.

By contrast, even the earliest of Sorabji's original compositions dispense with key signatures as the highly complex chromatic harmony—a stylistic feature from the

⁷ Sorabji described Roslavets's use of triple sharps as determination "perhaps to outdo Scriabin"—see "Modern Piano Technique", The Sackbut 1, no. 3 (July 1920): 118.

⁸ This is the explanation given in the published score of Opus clavicembalisticum.

outset—renders them redundant. However, the same basic procedure is followed: each accidental lasts for an entire bar unless cancelled. This practice continues until the early 1920s, when, in such works as Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue, and Piano Sonata No. 2, accidentals start to be applied for just a single note. The major factor behind this change in policy has less to do with any significant development in his harmonic language than with the increase in the length of individual bars. For instance, the Prelude from Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue is a two-part *perpetuum mobile*—five pages in length—with the only barline appearing at the end. However, this does not mean that all of the later works use the note-by-note method of notating accidentals. Some of the major orchestral compositions, such as the massive choral work Messa Alta Sinfonica, apparently return to the original usage. As before, the relationship with bar lengths is clear. Sensitive to the practical difficulties of ensemble that would be created by long bars of polyrhythmic music in a large-scale choral and orchestral context, Sorabji has reduced the bar lengths to a more manageable size for conducting—and added time signatures.⁹ In this situation special methods of deploying accidentals are unnecessary; the original approach resumes almost by default since the bars are not long enough for excessive repetition or chromatic alterations to occur, and the fact that each orchestral (and choral) performer has only a single line each to deal with—with the obvious exceptions of the organ and harp parts—mitigates the visual complexity of the texture typical of the solo piano and organ works.

⁹ This is particularly significant when one considers that at this stage of his life the ban was in effect and he was “supposed” to be writing for himself alone. Why should he be considering the practical problems of a work such as this?

It is this visual complexity, along with the relative length of individual bars—and the fact that so many of Sorabji’s works are for solo piano—that leads to his third method of notating accidentals dominating his output. He would, of course, have been familiar with other composers’ use of this procedure, which has the advantage of not only eliminating the problem of remembering chromatic alterations in long, texturally complex bars, but also of cleaning up the score by removing the need for naturals.

However, despite the relative success of this method in certain works by Busoni and van Dieren, Sorabji’s music poses different problems. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the nature of his harmonic language. One instance where it is particularly desirable to employ naturals is when a note is pitted against its own chromatic alteration (the so-called “false relations”). This kind of semitonal opposition is not merely common in his works, but an essential part of his technique to the extent that it is often treated as a consonance. The harmony outlined in fig. 1 is a classic example of just such a Sorabjian “consonance”.



Fig. 1. Harmony in final bar of the Offertorium from Messa Alta Sinfonica

The fact that Sorabji's intended solution is ultimately unsatisfactory may be seen not only from its inability to cope with such situations unambiguously—since it would be inconceivable to notate fig. 1 according to his “rules”—but also from his intermittent use of another approach to the vexed question of accidentals. Since this alternative procedure cannot be considered as part of the ongoing development of his notation—it may be found throughout his output as a whole—and since it was followed only inconsistently it will be discussed in more detail below, along with other anomalous aspects of his writing.

Interaction Of Elements

The above developments in Sorabji's notation are for the most part best understood in relation to changes in two particular areas: the general format and orientation of his scores (most significantly his published scores), and his extension of individual bars. This is, in effect, the expansion of the texture along the horizontal and vertical planes.

Horizontal Expansion: Format And Orientation

One of the most obvious visual differences between Sorabji's published piano music and that of the majority of other composers is that much of the former is arranged in a landscape format. Although standard for organ scores, this format is rarely used for piano, chamber, or vocal music; the fact that it has been carried over into the publications from the manuscripts is significant. The advantage of this layout is readily apparent: a greater number of bars can be fitted into each system, leading to an improved visual continuity. In this respect, we can see the increase in the length of individual bars influencing in turn the way in which the music was laid out on the

page. Retaining the more traditional layout would have led to bars being “broken” at the end of virtually every line / page. As it is, even the original publications of the 1920s and early 1930s have regular breaks over lines or pages.

It is inevitable that this should have had consequences for other features of the score; for instance, whether accidentals should continue to apply within a single bar that has been broken over the end of a line or page, or whether they should be restated as necessary. The first option would, of course, be ludicrous in cases—such as in Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue, Symphony II, Piano Sonata No. 5, and Piano Symphony No. 2—where a single bar can last for several pages. Even if a bar were to last the length of a system, this would be too long for individual accidentals to be retained in a perceptual “block”. That this is not a problem in the publications from Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue onwards is due to Sorabji’s instruction that accidentals should apply for one note only (excepting ties and obvious repetitions).¹⁰ In this respect, we can see part of the justification for this rule lying not only in the nature of the harmony (as was more the case with Busoni and van Dieren), but in the increasing length of bars and the tendency for them to be split over line- and page-breaks.

Another area where one can see problems arising of layout versus continuity is in the treatment of octave transpositions. As Sorabji’s symbol \hat{I} is not continuous (in the way that the traditional $8va$ is continuous) it is easy for a blithe reproduction of the manuscript to lead to redundant *loco* cancellations or—more seriously—passages be transcribed at sounding pitch that were intended to be played an octave higher or

¹⁰ Difficulties are more likely to occur where Sorabji deviates from this scheme by accident or design.

lower due to the absence of an added cautionary \hat{I} . Even Sorabji himself sometimes becomes confused (see below under “Oversights”).

As might be expected given the close relationship of format and orientation with other aspects of Sorabji’s notation the period in which this change of format takes place (the early 1920s) coincides with the development of other (often idiosyncratic) elements, as well as his compositional style in general.

Another related change also takes place at around this time. With the appearance in 1924 of the Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue as the first publication under the auspices of J. Curwen and Sons Ltd., London, came a reduction in the size of the printed music. This reduction (coupled with the larger score format used for the Third Sonata, the Organ Symphony, and Opus clavicembalisticum) meant that a greater amount of music could be fitted onto each line. Thus the writing could be clarified by allowing even greater portions to be displayed without breaks in continuity.

Vertical Expansion: Staves And Systems

Sorabji’s use of additional staves in each system of piano or organ music is, like issues of format, of relatively little interest in its own right; it is hardly an innovation. However, like his chosen format, his treatment of these additional staves often leads to tension between other aspects of notation that might otherwise have remained untroubled.

The source of these difficulties lies in the way in which music is actually distributed between the different staves. In a way Sorabji’s method is a compromise between traditional piano (or organ) notation and the greater visual clarity of part-writing offered by an “open score” layout. To be sure, it is also a natural development from the similar and increasing usage of extra staves by piano composers from Liszt

onwards. Nevertheless, the predominance of quasi-orchestral and strict contrapuntal textures in Sorabji's solo keyboard output leads to these cases now becoming the rule, rather than the exception. It has been remarked in the past that his fugal writing sometimes resembles the pages of a full score,¹¹ but his use of extended passages in the upper and lower reaches of the piano—to a lesser extent with the organ—frequently juxtaposed with other registers of the instrument, justifies additional staves on other grounds as well.

Because this approach is a compromise between piano / organ and orchestral formats it is not entirely satisfactory from either point of view. This is most apparent in the way individual voices are distributed between staves. Orchestral parts—inevitably—and traditionally presented piano and organ scores are relatively restrictive as to the peregrination of individual lines between staves. This is partly due to the traditional division of textures into melody, bass, and “filler harmonies”. We can see this arrangement starting to break down as textures become increasingly ambitious in the exploration of different effects, and so we can see the notational problems that bloom in the writing of Sorabji having seeds in the writing of composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Skryabin, and Szymanowski. With Sorabji employing three or more staves per system, each bar becoming greatly extended, and textures becoming ever more diverse in character, the parts can now move more freely between them—as in Variations 36 (see fig. 11) and 43 (see page 89 of the Curwen edition) from Opus clavicembalisticum, for instance. In some of the later works, which often use four staves per system whether necessary or not—perhaps as a means

¹¹ Stevenson, Western Music, 204.

of reducing textural clutter for the benefit of failing eyesight¹²—this vertical expansion also leads to awkward movement of parts between adjacent staves employing the same clef (fig. 2).

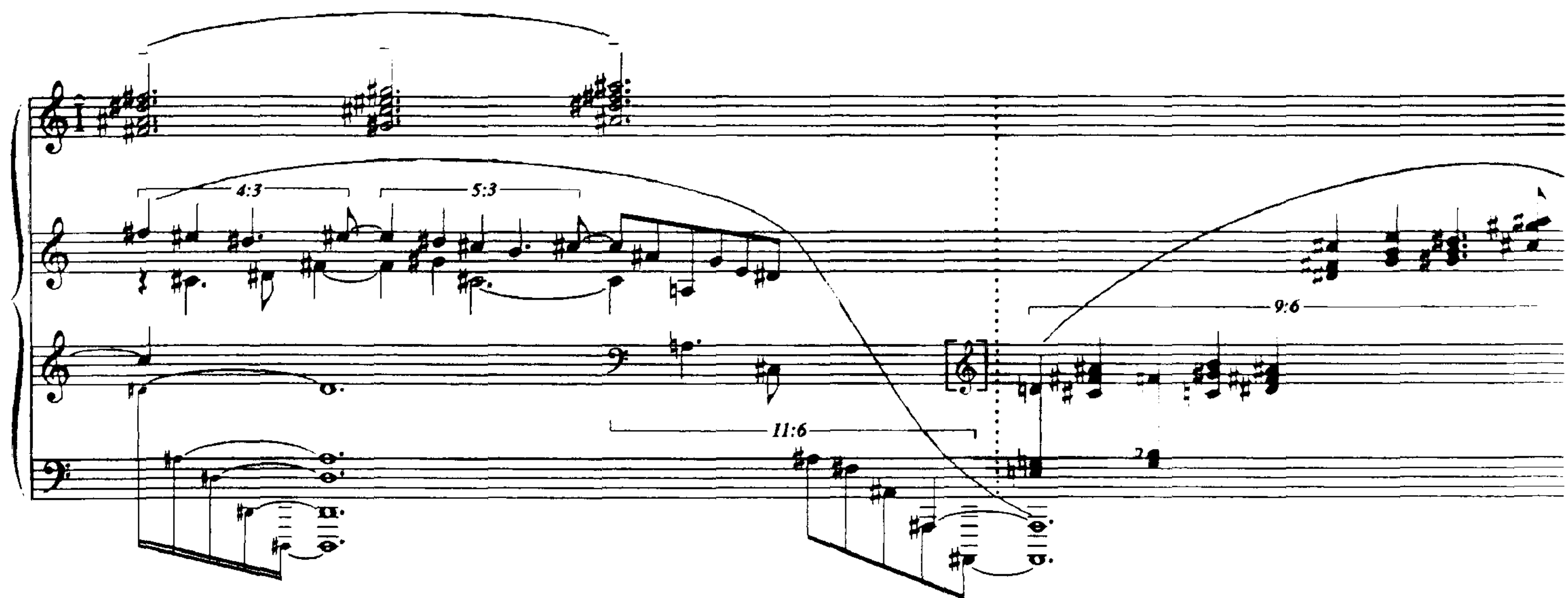


Fig. 2. Awkward movement of parts between staves in Piano Symphony No. 5, page 59

As we shall discover, this creates particular problems where rests are concerned (see below under “Inconsistencies”). At the same time, the expansion of the system encourages the use of transposition symbols, as substantial portions of the system can now be devoted entirely to extended registers; the top staff in Piano Sonata No. 1 is used exclusively for music sounding an octave higher than written.

Idiosyncrasies

In addition to the number of adjustments that Sorabji made to his notation in the early years of his career in an attempt to convey better the nature of his music, there are also to be found various other elements that make no real difference to the way the

¹² Hugh Polkinhorn, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Sorabji—The Piano Works, Donna Amato (Altarus, AIR-CD 9025, 1994).

music sounds or is perceived, but which he apparently altered anyway to suit himself. Some of these are elegant, if not essential; others are bizarre and unjustified, while nonetheless remaining reasonably clear as to intention.

Transposition Symbols

The most obviously practical of Sorabji's idiosyncratic symbols is the ubiquitous octave transposition sign, usually appearing as "Î". It is clearly related to the other changes in notation mentioned above in arising from the exigencies of his developing compositional style, specifically his individual approach to piano writing. As we have seen, this instrumental style is notable for its emphasis of the upper and lower registers of the instrument for extended passages—registers that would otherwise demand numerous leger lines. This was undoubtedly part of what was to become his unspoken aim of creating music that was designed "*orchestrally* for the piano *in terms of the piano*".¹³ The use of a sign that appears once within the staff itself (rather like a clef change), instead of continuously, like the conventional "8va", makes sense, partly due to the length of these passages, and partly due to the movement of the writing between (usually) three or more staves. However, it took several years of experimentation before he decided on the symbol that was to dominate his mature scores.

His earliest composition, "The Poplars", exists in two versions: a draft and a fair copy.¹⁴ The draft version of the piece employs the sign "I" with an upwards- or

¹³ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 203. He was clearly inspired by Alkan.

¹⁴ Both of these have the same date, but the inclusion of a performance note in one, a few minor alterations, and the generally more careful handwriting, mark it out as being the final version.

downwards-pointing arrow (↑ —as opposed to the later carat ^) to indicate the octave transpositions. These are replaced in the final version, either by writing the passage at sounding pitch or using the conventional *8va* marking.

Although a basic transposition symbol was established in the earliest works, a new sign “I/VIII” can be seen taking over around 1919. This notational transition is most clearly to be seen in the published score of Two Pieces for piano.¹⁵ Of these two pieces “In the Hothouse” (1918) uses Î, while “Toccata” (1920) has I/VIII.

Of the other works composed around this time, Piano Sonata No. 1 (1919) Fantaisie espagnole (1919), and Piano Quintet No. 1 (1919–21) employ I/VIII. Piano Sonata No. 2 (1920) also uses I/VIII, but this appears more frequently in the form Î/VIII. Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue (1920, 1922) is another work that utilises two different symbols within a single score. The concluding fugue was actually written first and uses I/VIII.¹⁶ By contrast, the Prelude and the Interlude, which were added later (the date 6 October 1922 appearing at the end of the latter), both prefer Î, as does Piano Sonata No. 3, which had already been completed on 5 May of that year. This decision, which apparently represents Sorabji’s final thoughts on the subject (his subsequent compositions retain Î), is not surprising given the typographically inelegant nature of I/VIII; moreover Î can be inverted without difficulty to ĩ in order to command *8va bassa*, and is certainly more easily adapted to Îĭ in order to meet the demands of the occasional two-octave transpositions used in some works. It can therefore be deduced that the period 1918–22 was one of experimentation in terms of

¹⁵ The individual manuscripts for these pieces have unfortunately disappeared.

¹⁶ The date given at the end of this movement is 27 February 1920.

this aspect of notation: I/VIII appeared between 1918 and 1919 and was gradually changed to Î via Î/VIII between 1920 and 1922.

Accents

A more curious example of Sorabji's experimentation is his treatment of the *marcato* accent ">". In the majority of his manuscripts this is actually written as "<". What is so intriguing about this is not simply the illogic of this reversal—the original is, after all, an accurate visual representation of the attack and decay of the sound—but rather the fact that in his earlier manuscripts it is the traditional form that prevails. The change can be seen in the manuscript of Le Jardin Parfumé: on page three we can find examples of both forms of this accent, but the remainder of the score has the later form. It is not known why he chose to write his accents this way, especially as he started his career by notating them correctly,¹⁷ but they are invariably adjusted to follow convention in his publications. This was most likely done to follow professional guidelines for notation without any input from the composer, but one can occasionally find instances where individual accents were apparently overlooked and left in the form they appear in the manuscript (as can be seen on page 31 of the published score of Opus clavicembalisticum).

Brackets and Braces

A similar eccentricity to be found in the manuscripts is the use of brackets, as opposed to braces, at the beginning of each system. Again, the early pieces in his output (for piano solo) employ the more traditional form and there is no obvious reason for the change later on. It is possible that the contrapuntally-derived quasi-

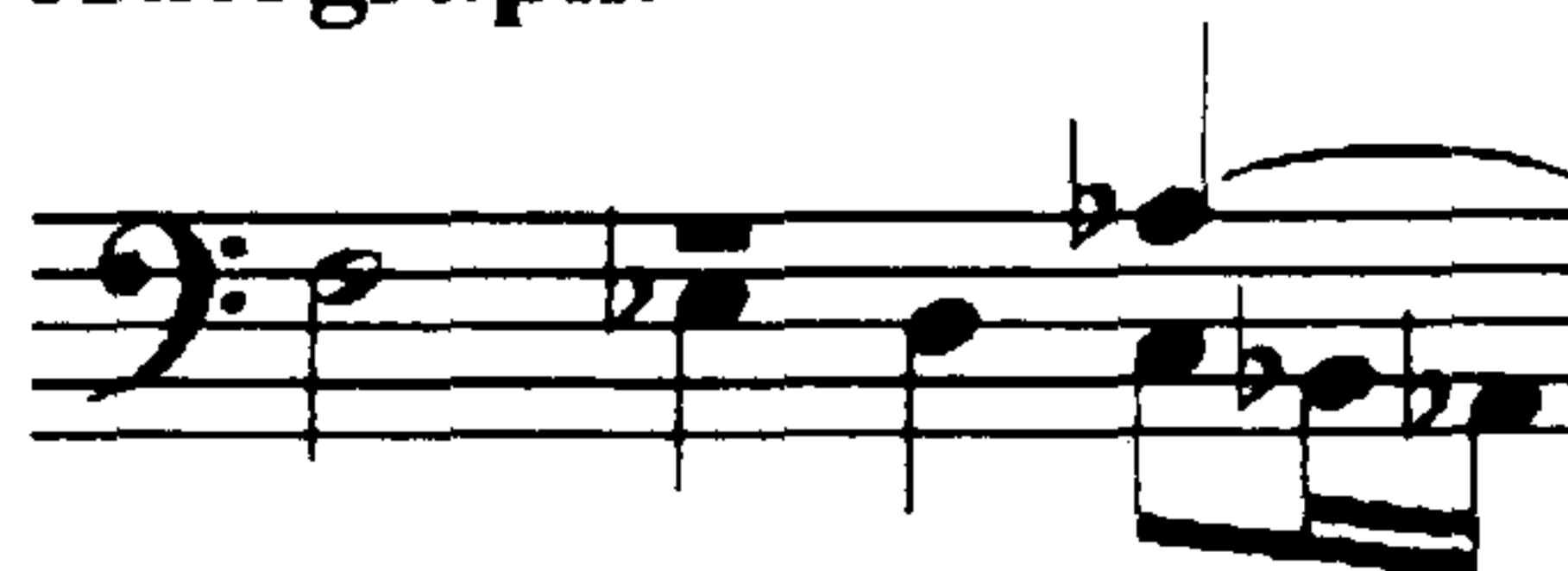
¹⁷ Once again "The Poplars" provides the earliest example.

orchestral textures that he employs in his mature solo keyboard works led him to choose brackets, which are more commonly used for “two or more staves bearing quite separate or individual parts, whether vocal or instrumental.”¹⁸ However, the fact that these parts are all being played by one instrument, rather than many, goes against the letter, if not the spirit, of this definition.

Alignment Of Rests

The most confusing of Sorabji’s notational idiosyncrasies is his manner of positioning some of the rests in his manuscripts. These are often centrally placed within their assigned values; that is to say, a semibreve rest would be situated at the start of the third crotchet beat, rather than the first beat as convention demands.

Autograph:



Published version:



Fig. 3. Misreading of rests in Opus clavicembalisticum

In fig. 3 we can see one instance of a semibreve rest being positioned in just this way in the manuscript of Opus clavicembalisticum. Not surprisingly, its alignment with the third crotchet beat in this bar (together with the fact that the rest itself appears

¹⁸ Read, 36.

as a vague blob), led to it being interpreted by the printers as a minim. Sorabji apparently did not notice this when he examined the proofs as he made no alterations; the error was therefore carried into the publication, where it appears on page 113. A similar problem may be seen on page 111 of the published score. This also remained uncorrected through the publication process, even though he later corrected the related inaccurate alignment in his “working copy” of the printed edition and added rests present in the manuscript (fig. 4).¹⁹



Fig. 4. Incorrect and missing elements of notation in Sorabji’s “working copy” of Opus clavicembalisticum (edition by J. Curwen and Sons, 1931)

It is possible that this unusual manner of notating rests is another result of the gradual increase in the length of bars; perhaps in some cases at least he was interpreting rests as being more akin to a type of *fermata* (fig. 5). In this sense the semibreve is being used to indicate a general period of silence, rather than a specific value (it is rather similar to the way that these rests are positioned centrally in empty

¹⁹ The nature and significance of the “working copy”—Sorabji’s personal copy of the published score—will be discussed in chapter 4.

bars—regardless of time signature—in traditional notation). Fig. 3 seems less perverse when considered in this way, and this kind of usage becomes still more convenient when dealing with irregular groupings of notes—such as crochets, quavers, or semiquavers arranged or beamed in fives—that cannot otherwise be expressed with a single note or rest (see “Approximate Note-values and Rests” below).

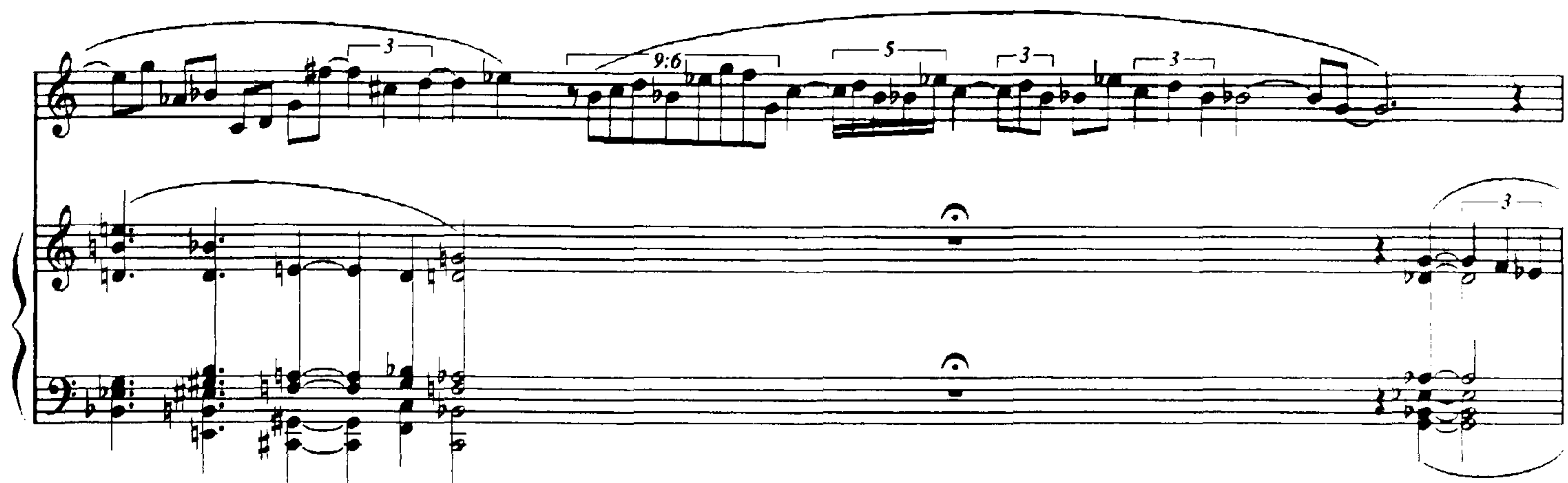


Fig. 5. Positioning of rests to indicate a *fermata* in Movement for voice and piano

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the period up to the middle of the 1920s was an important one for Sorabji, in terms of both compositional development and notational experimentation. It is this period that forms a bridge between what we would consider traditional notation and what was to become Sorabji’s own standard usage. The relationship between notation and compositional development is not unexpected because it would be only natural for the composer to seek new ways of expressing himself on paper as he started to evolve an individual musical language and conceive ideas of an increasing textural and rhythmic complexity, freedom, and diversity.

It should perhaps be emphasised that there is no evidence that Sorabji—at either this or any other stage of his career— sat down and analysed systematically how he could best modify notation in order to express himself. On the contrary, it is rather more likely that he just adopted variants as situations arose that could not be written conveniently with conventional notation, and this was almost certainly without regard for the impact his solutions might have on other aspects of his writing; he frequently had the examples of other composers to follow, whether it was in the application of accidentals or the addition of extra staves to accommodate expanded piano textures.

This lack of a methodical approach may also be seen in his use of idiosyncratic and unnecessary manifestations of ordinary notation. His new transposition symbols at least are understandable, and one can see why he might want to experiment with different versions before deciding on the one that he was to employ for the rest of his career. On the other hand, his choices of accent are bizarre; there was no reason for him to change them, and his alternative form is rather less explicit than the original. One can only speculate what might have prompted such unwarranted adjustments, but perhaps they were driven by the same spirit of experimentation that motivated his compositional development: essentially a desire to express his individuality. Perhaps his use of different symbols might even be comparable to the variety of signatures that appear in the composer's letters to Philip Heseltine.²⁰

Problems Involving Notation

Having established some features of Sorabji's treatment of notation in the early years of his career, and the ways in which he modified certain conventions as his own

²⁰ Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 208.

compositional style developed, we may now examine the various ways in which he deviated from these, separating what is anomalous from what is purely idiosyncratic. This naturally provides some insight into his attitudes towards the written part of the compositional process, and the resulting problems that he faced as a performer in the 1920s and 30s—as discussed in chapter 2. What is also interesting is why, having found at least some ways in which to resolve the growing tension between his compositional style and its expression via notation, he did not apply them more rigorously and consistently.

The result is that there are numerous anomalies to be found throughout Sorabji's published and unpublished scores, and these may be placed into several broad categories: oversights and inconsistencies; ambiguous notation and “simple” errors; “deliberate mistakes”; unresolved problems of inadequate notation; and compositional problems. To some extent there is an overlap between these categories, and certain elements of notation may also demonstrate several separate types of problem. The advantage of proceeding in this manner, as opposed to presenting a list that considers each element of notation in turn, is that one may then obtain a better idea of how particular aspects of notation interact; the different types may also be tackled on a roughly ascending scale of severity from minor slips to potential compositional breakdown. In other words, it may be demonstrated that not only are Derus's assertions concerning Sorabji's compositional prowess misplaced, but also that the anomalies to be found in his scores potentially compromise their integrity as structurally secure and performable compositions.

Oversights And Inconsistencies

The most common of the different types of error to be found in Sorabji's scores are the various oversights and inconsistencies. Oversights might simply be described as those cases where a single element of notation has been omitted, apparently accidentally. By contrast, those omissions categorised as "inconsistencies", while presumably equally unintentional, are careless deviations from a predetermined system, such as his stated method of applying accidentals. Other inconsistencies are similarly indicative of an inability to follow a pre-established practice. By their nature these are relatively basic errors—the equivalent of misspellings or typos—that could—and should—have been easily corrected by Sorabji at a later date, particularly in the cases of those pieces that were published in his lifetime.

Oversights

Transpositions

As is customary, Sorabji uses the marking "*loco*" to indicate that the music has returned to sounding at written pitch after being transposed up or down an octave. Unfortunately, as is sometimes the case with clefs (see below), he forgets once in a while to add this sign to indicate that a change has taken place.

Occasionally there can be found a passage that includes a transposition and subsequent *loco* but still fails to make sense. One such problem passage may be found in the third movement of Piano Symphony No. 2 (fig. 6). Here we can see how discontinuities in the registers of both the right and left hand parts lead to confusion. The most serious problem occurs in the bass part. The *8va bassa* transposition is applied properly but the vague positioning of the *loco* cancellation between the E_b and F of the following group makes no sense. In fact, there is no sensible location for the

transition to sounding pitch to be effected. One can only conclude that Sorabji at a later date noticed a discrepancy between transposed material as marked, and untransposed material (i.e., lacking a I symbol) at the beginning of the next system. The *loco* was therefore added, but without sufficient regard as to its effect on the passage. The register of the treble part has shifted between pages 143 and 144. The composer evidently noticed this because he used the *8va* - - - marking instead of his normal symbol, which strongly suggests that it was a subsequent addition. This also leads to registral ambiguity when the right-hand part moves down into the lower staff (the top part has to sound an octave higher, while the lower part remains at pitch).

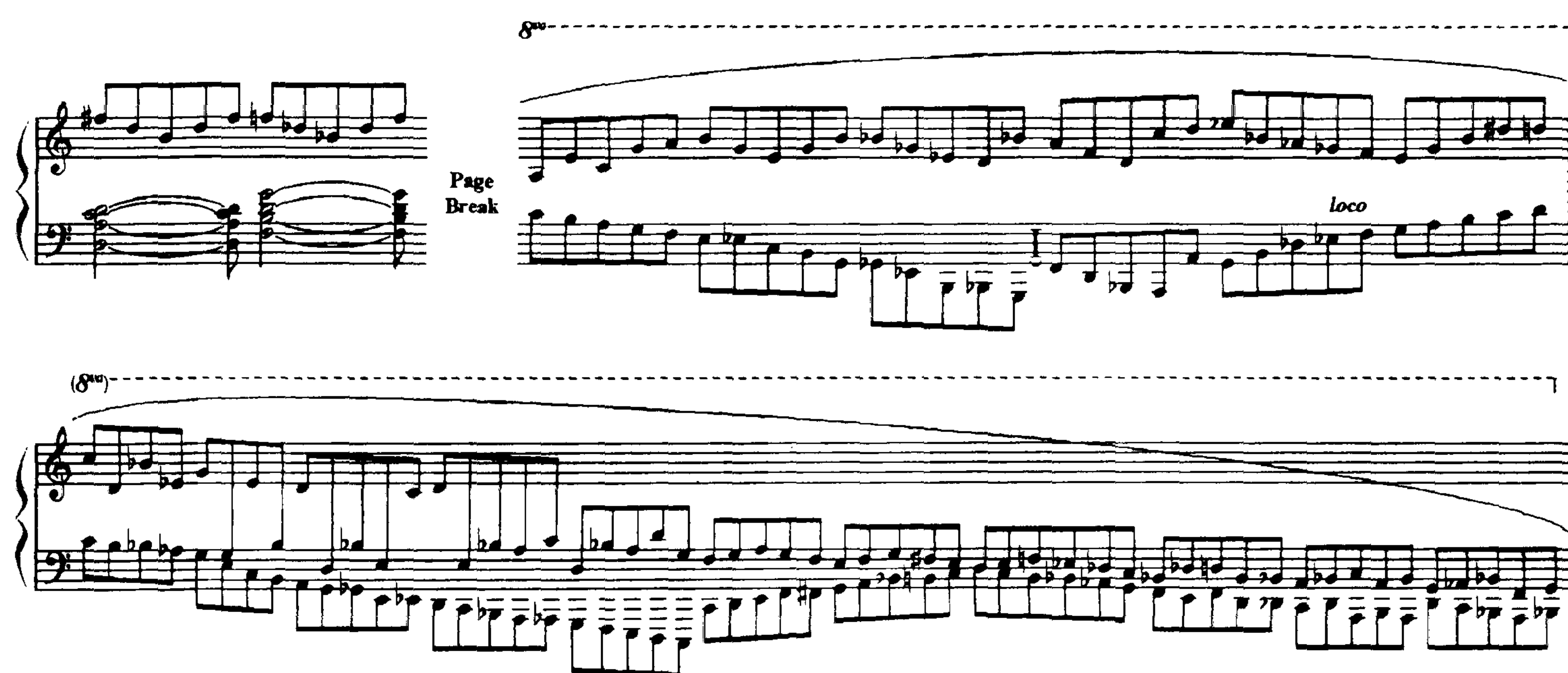


Fig. 6. Registral discontinuities in Piano Symphony No. 2, pages 143–44

What is also interesting regarding continuity is the phrasing slur: it suddenly appears at the beginning of page 144. We can be certain that this phrase mark does not actually begin with the treble A because this part is entirely thematic: this passage

is the middle section of a vast passacaglia theme. It would appear to be an example of what Derus described: not looking back.

Problems like this are fortunately rare in Sorabji's output, but are particularly serious because such breaks in continuity can so easily lead to total compositional collapse: they cannot be easily corrected for performance (see also "Compositional Problems" below).

Clefs

As is the case with transposition, Sorabji sometimes forgets to mark certain elements, either through oversight, or because he is taking them for granted. There are, for instance, occasions when he omits clef changes. For the most part these missing clefs do not obscure the meaning of a given passage: it is usually clear from context where the music is going and what clef it is in, even when several unmarked clef changes occur in quick succession (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Unmarked clef changes in Villa Tasca, page 42

In other cases it is clear from the nature of the writing that a clef change has taken place, but it is not necessarily obvious how or why this has suddenly happened.



Fig. 8. Missing clef change in Piano Symphony No. 1, page 208

Fig. 8 shows how one passage from the fugue of Piano Symphony No. 1 changes over a line break from bass to treble clef, without any obvious link. The only logical place for the clef change is after the quaver F# as illustrated. Kevin Bowyer has cited another example in Organ Symphony No. 2, but, like fig. 6, such severe cases of inadvertent breaks in linear continuity are fortunately rare.²¹ However, there are sometimes even occasions where Sorabji himself does not seem to be quite sure which clef he is in. In fig. 9 the passage in brackets that rises into the top staff is a derivative of the “dominant theme” of Piano Symphony No. 2 (see fig. 58). The notes at the beginning and end of the phrase suggest that this statement of the theme is supposed to appear in octaves throughout. For this to be the case beats 2–6 of the second bar in staff 2 would have to be read in bass clef; this is also implied by the instructions to play staff 2 with the left hand (this clearly wouldn’t be possible in treble clef). However, the inner part (in quavers) is clearly in treble clef on beats 1–3 and 7 onwards (beat 7 makes more sense compositionally—despite the left hand

²¹ Bowyer, 284.

marker—if read in treble clef). The resulting tension between this apparent use of two different clefs simultaneously completely disrupts the thematic statement in octaves: for instance, does the opening of this bar move A–D or C–D or A–B? Anyone attempting to sight-read this seemingly innocuous passage would clearly get a nasty surprise.



Fig. 9. Ambiguous use of clefs in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 138

Ties and Slurs

The positioning of ties and slurs is often vague and approximate. There are also numerous instances where ties or slurs extend over a line- or page-break but are only notated on one side of the break. As we have seen, Fig. 6 contains a typical example of a missing phrasing slur, and the hiatus in phrasing here compounds the discontinuity in register that has already been discussed.

It is also not uncommon for ties to be missing, even where their presence is clearly implied: variation 15 from the Theme and Variations of Opus clavicembalisticum (fig. 10) is one such example, with the ties being demanded by the division of certain note-values in the canonic treatment of the theme. The circled

notes show where ties appear to be missing. Sorabji never corrected these particular oversights, even after publication.



Fig. 10. Missing ties in Opus clavicembalisticum, page 69 (edition by J. Curwen and Sons, 1931)

However, such situations are not to be mistaken for those other occasions where the notation is suspended deliberately. For instance, there are the deliberately incomplete ties that are an established part of notational convention and in Sorabji's music are usually used to indicate "*laissez vibrer*"; they may typically be found in those passages where awkward note-values are required (such as five crotchets) with the ties being used to indicate that the note or chord should be sustained throughout this duration.

Inconsistencies

In addition to the oversights, there are also numerous inconsistencies in the application of notation to be found. The main feature that distinguishes these from the above category is that each type of notation has a fundamental system underlying it: it is clear—either from context, or because Sorabji himself has elsewhere provided an

explanation of his intentions—that these are unjustified deviations from a predetermined method of notation—or an inability to decide on any one method.

Thematic Markers

The least disruptive of these examples of inconsistency is the treatment of thematic markers. Their presence or absence in a score has no direct effect on the music itself; at best they may provide an insight into the design of individual movements—particularly those conceived in long continuous spans—with the opening movements of the first three Piano Symphonies providing particularly clear examples of this. Sorabji is often meticulous in drawing our attention to thematic material, but at other times there may be long stretches of music with little or nothing in the way of markings. It is possible that these were only for his own benefit, to enable him to keep track of the structure as it unfolded onto the page, but they just as effectively work for us as signposts through the textural labyrinths of his large-scale compositions.

Unfortunately, as well as being inconsistent in his highlighting of thematic material he also uses a variety of different symbols, although the type tends to vary according to context, up to a point. Themes may be labelled by number (usually circled; occasionally enclosed by a box), by brackets (horizontal or vertical), by letter(s), or by letter *and* number.

Numbers (on their own) tend to be particularly associated with Sorabji's unique first movement form. This form—which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5—has been described by Kevin Bowyer as “a kind of pure music drama”,²²

²² Ibid.

and by the composer himself at various times as a “fabric” or “*intreccio*”.²³ It introduces a series of themes (varying in number anywhere from seven to sixty-four) in turn during an exposition and then combines them in various ways throughout the course of the rest of the movement. In more complex movements, markers are generally helpful; less so if utilised inconsistently, the first movement of Symphony II being a case in point. Here, thematic numbering appears only with the onset of the Fantasia section; the initial statement of each theme in the exposition is unmarked.²⁴ The disadvantage of this state of affairs becomes apparent when one traces the identity of each of the twenty-seven themes back to the Introito: several of them are decidedly innocuous on their first appearance, and without clear identification might not otherwise be distinguished from the general texture. The slightly earlier Fourth Piano Sonata is rather more successful in this respect: each of the seven themes that form the basis of the first movement (identified by letters a–g) is carefully marked on its initial appearance in the exposition; subsequent appearances are not. The various themes in the other movements of this work are not identified in the score, but an analytical note tells us how many themes appear in each movement, making the task of finding them somewhat easier.

²³ This is the description that appears on the title page of the manuscript of Piano Symphony No. 5, referring to the main section of the first movement; the corresponding movement of Piano Symphony No. 6 is called “*intrecciata*”. See also chapter 5.

²⁴ This work has essentially the same first movement form as the majority of Sorabji’s solo symphonies, despite being broken down into four discrete sub-movements labelled “Introito”, “Fantasia”, “Cadenza”, and “Coda-Stretta”. These divisions only serve to clarify the form: the Introito being the exposition, the Fantasia being the main development section, and so on. This type of compound movement is not uncommon in Sorabji’s output: Piano Quintet No. 2 has a first movement consisting of “Introito”, “Fantasia”, and “Coda-Finale”; that of the Third Organ Symphony is made up of “Introito”, “Fantasia”, and “Coda-Ripieno”.

Other pieces of his that have a separate explanation of the thematic structure are Toccata No. 1 and Opus clavicembalisticum—the only works for which he wrote out full thematic tables. Even here occasional confusion may be found. A few occurrences of the various themes are labelled in the score in the Preludio-Corale movement of Opus clavicembalisticum, but at the bottom of page 9 of the published score theme 4 is mistakenly marked as “2”.

More widespread than numbers or letters for highlighting thematic references are various kinds of bracket. Vertical brackets or half-brackets appear at the beginning of themes and are particularly to be found marking fugal entries. They are somewhat similar in appearance to the signs that indicate the distribution of hands in complex textures, but can generally be distinguished according to context.

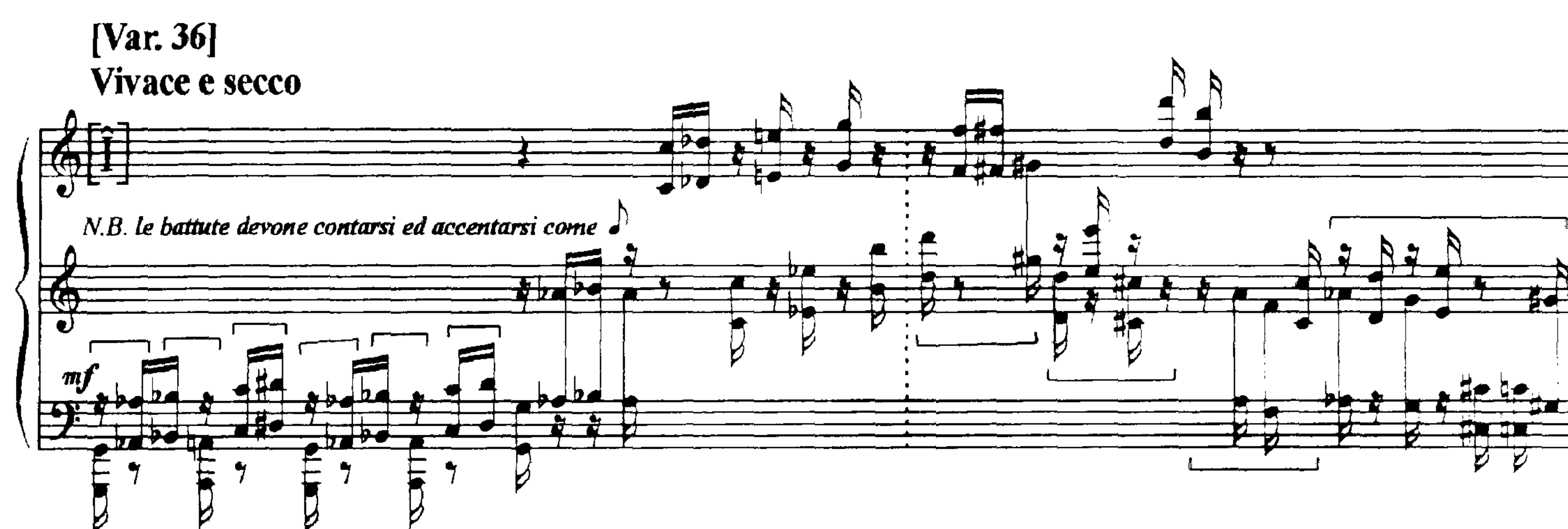


Fig. 11. Grouping of notes in Opus clavicembalisticum

Horizontal brackets appear above or below themes for their entire length. This latter type is perhaps best understood as connecting related elements of notation. As well as grouping together those notes that form part of a theme they might also be used in rhythmically complex passages to indicate how the notes are related to an

individual beat or how notes should be grouped in performance (figs. 11 and 25ii).

Again, the differences in meaning are usually clear from context.

Barlines

The treatment of barlines provides one of the prime examples of Sorabji's inability to decide on a method of notation and then follow it. With the Third Piano Sonata he started employing the dotted barline that was to become standard, and by doing this (rather than retaining the traditional format) he was emphasising the metrical freedom of his music. However, although the dotted barline remained the most prevalent type throughout the remainder of his career it was by no means used exclusively. He continued to write the "normal" solid barline in certain places, as well as various combinations of dotted and solid lines.

If these barlines no longer had any direct connection with metre why did he use them? Moreover, why did he need to rely on so many different kinds? The answer to the first of these questions would seem to be that he wanted them to indicate points of stress and phrasing; in other words, they retained the idea of the "strong beat" from conventional metric notation, while relinquishing the allegiance to a constant metre. In the context of twentieth century music this is, of course, by no means unique. What is more unusual is the extent to which additional varieties of barline delineate hierarchical levels of the musical structure. For instance, the dotted barline is Sorabji's default barline, while the solid barline tends to appear at the end of a particular section: perhaps where a tempo change has occurred, as with the occasional slow nocturne-like passages to be found in the first movements of the Piano Symphonies. This is more clearly expressed in the variation sets, particularly the passacaglia-type movements. Here, the dotted barlines once again form the basis of

the writing, while the solid barlines separate each individual variation. However, it is the fugues that develop this hierarchical treatment of barlines most fully. There is a close correspondence between the formal design of the fugues and the application of barlines: as well as the individual bars, different types separate the entries (and episodes, where these are to be found), and the four sections of the main part of the fugue (*recto*, *inversus*, *cancrizans*, *cancrizans inversus*); see fig. 14. Since the majority of his fugues are multi-partite yet another type precedes the introduction of each new subject.

The problem is that while one can make a reasonably informed guess as to Sorabji's intentions where these different barlines are concerned, the reasons for his deviations from these logical schemes are rather less apparent. One finds a degree of inconsistency in the fugues from Organ Symphony No. 1 (1924) and Piano Symphony No. 5 (1973) that is comparable despite the distance in time that separates them. Unsurprisingly the Organ Symphony is less developed compositionally, and this is reflected in the notation, but there is enough discipline in the treatment of barlines in both works to make lapses apparent. Widening the focus to other styles and forms, there is no obvious reason why Piano Sonata No. 3 should consist mainly of dotted barlines (including one double dotted barline), while Le Jardin Parfumé, written a year later, should revert to entirely traditional barlines. Similarly, it is unclear why the Epilogue from Piano Symphony No. 5 should require solid barlines that differentiate it from the rest of the piece, especially when the first two systems (only) of this particular movement *do* use dotted barlines. In cases such as this it cannot be argued that these were simply "slips of the pen" or oversights—he pursued this "aberrant" scheme in the Symphony for ten pages—so why did he do it?

Rests

There is a multitude of further problems to be found where Sorabji's treatment of rests is concerned. These include their placement in the score, the types that are used, and their absence at critical points. Fig. 12 reveals some of these *in situ*: use of approximate values (particularly throughout system 1); centrally-positioned rests (throughout system 2); unnecessary use of rests (system 3; cf. system 2, bar 2).

Many of these derive from horizontal and vertical expansion of the texture. In traditional two-stave piano writing the placement of rests is rarely problematic: the limited number of staves means that there is by and large a correspondence between the use of rests to indicate inactivity in a staff and to indicate the cessation of a given part or element (treble, bass, etc.) of the texture. By contrast, it is frequently the case in Sorabji's scores, especially in the essentially two-part writing of most of the *moto-perpetuo*-type movements, that the writing constantly moves freely between three or more staves, leaving substantial areas of the system without either rests or notes. In such cases rests apparently serve a subtly different purpose, being linked instead to the music, rather than the staff, but any specific conventions governing their application with respect to the music are less obvious.

This inconsistency is most apparent in the treatment of rests in conjunction with individual contrapuntal parts. Sometimes he uses a single rest within a given staff to indicate the cessation of all activity at that point; sometimes he uses more than one rest simultaneously as though more than one individual voice is being used. This vacillation may even be found in the fugues, where strict control over the part-writing might be expected. In other cases rests may be added where they are not strictly necessary; for example, at points where the music crosses into an adjacent staff.

leggo
 III. Moto Piu mosso non allegro - Quasi Sinfonia - Introduzione - Ritrattato.
 Molto in una araba di minor esultanza.

The musical score is written on ten staves. The first staff has a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The rests are placed in various positions, including above and below the staves, and are often grouped with beams. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

Fig. 12. Use and positioning of rests in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 133

In certain situations—such as the final section of the fugue from Piano Symphony No. 2, where each system contains six staves of music—the inconsistent treatment of the rests often reduces the clarity of the part-writing, especially at the numerous points where individual voices cross.

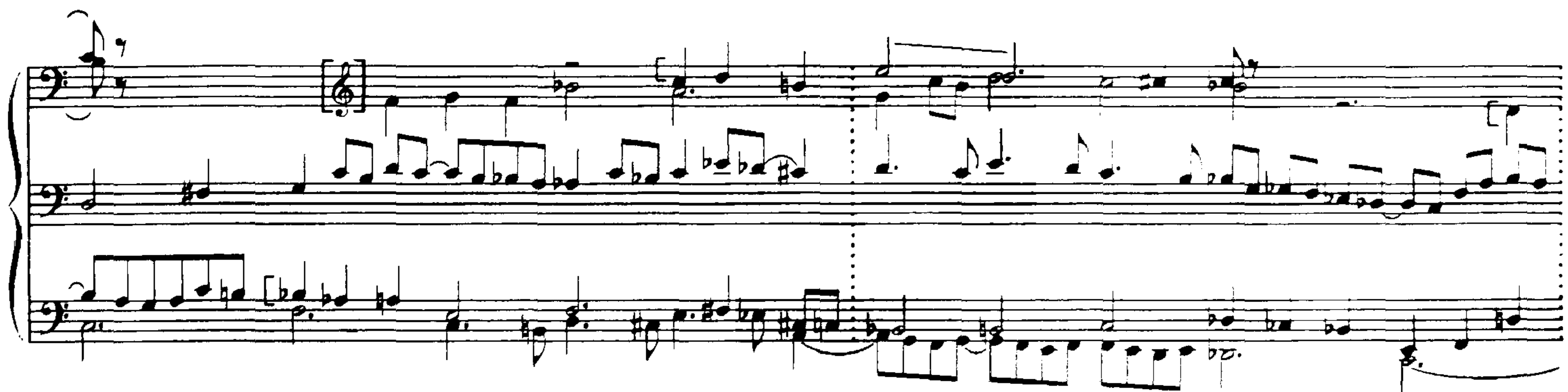


Fig. 13. Missing rests in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 196

This inconsistent treatment is related to a more common problem with his usage of rests, namely his tendency to omit them unexpectedly when a part (whether in a fugal or non-fugal context) falls silent. This is particularly to be found between the end of a phrase and a barline, but may occur in other positions as well (figs. 10 and 13).

Accidentals

Sorabji's treatment of accidentals is potentially the most serious of his inconsistencies insofar as it directly affects the way the music sounds and is most open to different interpretations. His early attempts to find a convenient method of notating accidentals are undermined by his apparent inability to follow any one system consistently. The combination of his characteristic harmonies and textures hinders the formulation of a single method that will cover all eventualities (as in

fig. 1), and the composer's dithering therefore reflects, to some extent, the expediency in adapting to a given situation. Nevertheless, there are also frequent instances when he adopts alternative practices without warning, and sometimes without obvious reason.

Apart from the three main methods that have already been outlined there is another system of applying accidentals that Sorabji follows only intermittently—one which he never mentioned in his scores. Put crudely, this appears to consist of having chromatic alterations continue for the length of a beamed group of notes; in other words, it is similar to the conventional key signature approach but in a more localised area. However, this “rule” is more apparent than real, and largely caused by Sorabji making assumptions about the chromatic identities of notes in passages where the same note reappears within a short space of time (fig. 25). It seems likely that he was simply taking the accidentals for granted because he understood from the context what they must have been. As a result, this taking for granted of accidentals may also occasionally be found outside beamed groups, again when a note is quickly repeated. This may be seen in particular in certain characteristic thematic gestures, especially those to be found in fugues. This can be seen particularly clearly in fig. 14, which illustrates how Sorabji later emended part of Fugue II from Opus clavicembalisticum in his own “working copy” of the published score. However, it does beg the question: why did he not do this before submitting Opus clavicembalisticum for publication, or at least correct the proofs? Some attempt to answer this will be made in chapter 4.

On other occasions, instead of taking them for granted, Sorabji does the opposite: *adding* accidentals that his proposed method has made redundant.

40

K. S. 16

The image displays four systems of musical notation for a piece titled 'Opus clavicembalisticum'. Each system consists of two staves, likely representing the right and left hands of a keyboard instrument. The notation is complex, featuring many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes, as well as various rests and accidentals. In each system, there are handwritten annotations in Sorabji's characteristic style, including 'x' marks, circled notes, and other markings that indicate additional accidentals or performance instructions. The first system has a '40' written vertically on the left. The fourth system has 'K. S. 16' written vertically on the right.

Fig. 14. Additional accidentals marked by Sorabji in his “working copy” of Opus clavicembalisticum, page 40 (edition by J. Curwen and Sons, 1931)

In many cases these are courtesy naturals, often unnecessary and taken to extremes, creating a cluttered effect that his stated approach was intended to avoid: one chord in Opus clavicembalisticum (to be found on page 183 of the published score) has no fewer than ten naturals, all of which are redundant according to this scheme. He may even add cautionary naturals *before* a chromatic alteration occurs as well as afterwards, thus emphasising the change.

Aside from these problems of inconsistency, the situation is not helped by Sorabji's sloppy alignment of accidentals in his manuscripts. Chords with multiple accidentals are inevitably the main source of this type of difficulty (although some contrapuntal passages may also apply). Obviously written at speed, they are often positioned only approximately; a number of the misprints in the original publication are the result of misreading. At other times the handwriting may be sufficiently poor for the identity of the accidental to be in doubt: naturals may occasionally be mistaken for sharps, or even flats, and vice versa.

Ambiguous Notation And "Simple" Errors

The section above outlines how Sorabji frequently either forgets individual elements of notation, or omits to follow a predetermined system of his own making. By contrast, the following section will consider those occasions where he actually writes inaccurate notation or presents it in such a way that it could be interpreted differently (and incorrectly).

Problems With Leger Lines

Even with the frequent clef changes and the use of transposition symbols there are often to be found passages, some quite lengthy, where there is a heavy reliance on

leger lines. These can lead to two particular problems. The first of these is related to Sorabji's handwriting: more specifically the fact that the note-heads in his autograph manuscripts appear as small wedges. Frequently these look much the same as his leger lines, and so in situations where chords with some or all of the notes in spaces appear entirely above or below the staff they sometimes have to be identified solely from context. Fig. 15 provides an illustration of this, demonstrating how one chord in Opus clavicembalisticum was bizarrely transcribed in the publication.

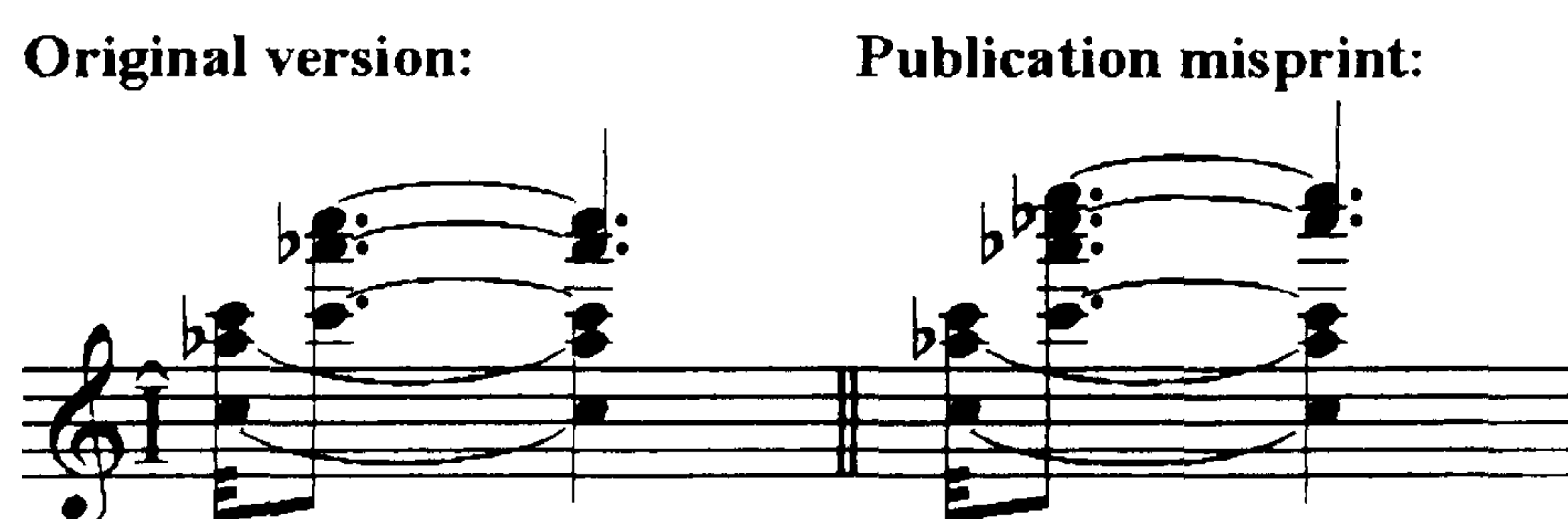


Fig. 15. Mis-transcribed chord in Opus clavicembalisticum (passacaglia, variation 40)

As can be seen, it was those notes that appear in spaces that were confused with leger lines; it is not clear why the printers felt the need to add a C \flat , as only an A \flat is given in the manuscript. Sorabji in fact corrected this passage in the proofs for this work, but for some reason they were not incorporated into the published score (he did not correct the chord again in his own “working copy” of the publication).

The second major problem involving leger lines is Sorabji's intermittent habit of omitting one or more of these lines when writing above or below the staff. Whether this happened by accident or design is unknown, but it again requires notes to be identified by context and / or vertical alignment relative to adjacent notes.

For example, the bass E \flat that occurs at the end of the first bar of fig. 8 actually

appears to be G, in the manuscript of Piano Symphony No. 1, due to a missing leger line. However, its correct identity may be easily determined, as it is part of the first fugue subject.

Tuplets

Tuplets play a fundamental role in Sorabji's music and appear in all from his earliest to his very last works. It is this extensive use of tuplets more than anything else that gives his music such a sense of freedom and contributes to its distinctive sound and texture. In the music of many composers tuplets (whether in one or several parts) are anchored by an underlying beat (or pause), whereas in Sorabji's case they often appear in all of the parts simultaneously, which combines with the lack of a firm metre or harmonic rhythm to create an unstable effect. One result of this polyrhythmic saturation is that it becomes more difficult to spot errors in the rhythmic notation: it is not always immediately apparent—especially in the autographs, where alignments are only approximate—how the various elements of the texture relate to one another (figs. 16 and 19).

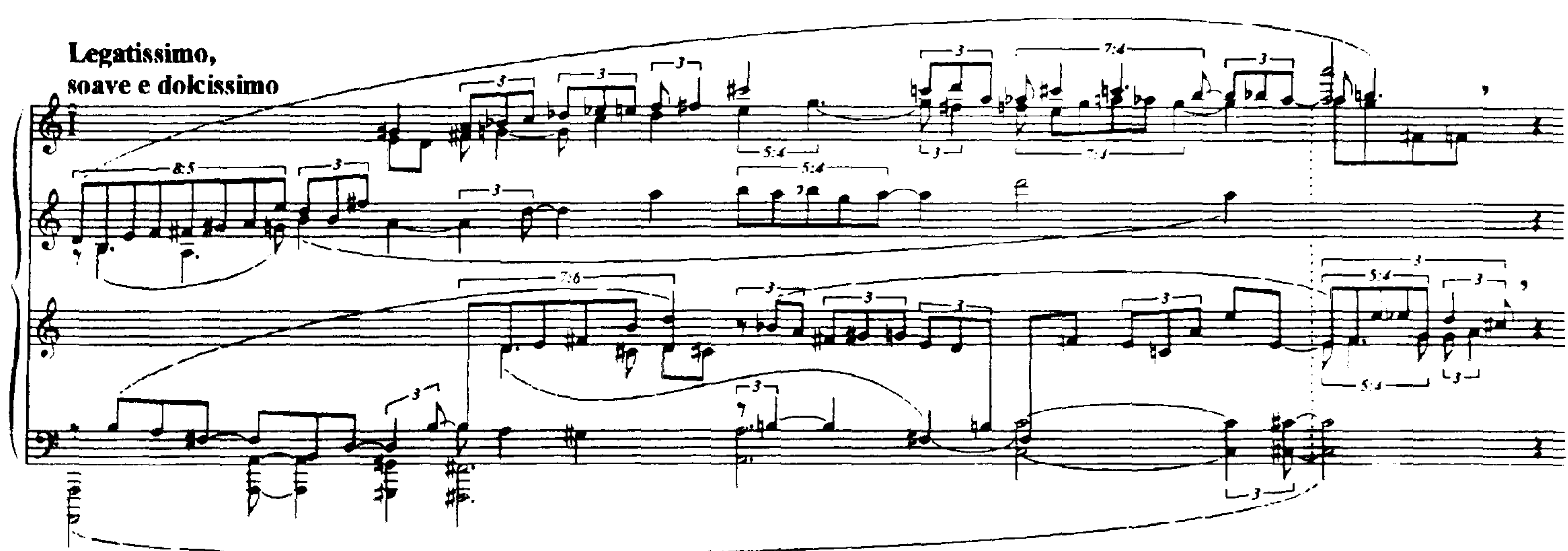


Fig. 16. Polyrhythmic counterpoint in Gulistan, page 13

It is perhaps not surprising therefore that Sorabji occasionally miscounts the actual number of notes involved in a tuplet. This is inevitably more common in larger groupings, but can sometimes happen in more obvious contexts. It is also not unknown for him to omit writing the number of notes altogether; sometimes there will be no apparent reason for this, but it is more common for this to occur when a semi-autonomous part in the same ratio appears in the same or an adjacent staff. In such cases he is clearly taking the notation for granted, although, occasionally, the nature of the contrapuntal texture is such that there is simply no space to include markings conveniently.

Sorabji almost always notates his tuplets as a number with a bracket (e.g., $\neg 3 \neg$), as opposed to a slur or a number on its own, which is an aid to clarity. He is less consistent as to whether he uses a simple number or a ratio; some tuplets have no markings at all (fig. 20). It is understandable that some polyrhythms will be expressed in ratios due to their unfamiliarity and complexity, while some—3:2, 4:3, for instance—are sufficiently familiar to be expressed as a simple 3 or 4. What is less satisfactory is his apparent indecision on some occasions as to whether a ratio or a simple number is more appropriate: often the same tuplet will be treated differently from moment to moment. This creates the most problems when unfamiliar ratios are juxtaposed with more familiar ones; for instance, he might use both 5:4 and 5:3 in the same passage but only notate one of these explicitly (if at all).

Miscellaneous Errors

As well as the particular problems outlined above, there are a number of other errors that are apparently the result of miscounting or misreading elements of his own notation. For instance, a tuplet may have an incorrect value, particularly if it consists of a large number of notes. Such misreadings, by their nature, are less immediately obvious to the reader—evidently including Sorabji himself—particularly if the notes are tightly clustered in a limited space in the manuscript or some note-heads or stems are not clearly defined due to problems with the ink.

On other occasions dotted figuration may be notated inaccurately because Sorabji has written too many (or too few) augmentation dots vs. flags/beams (fig. 17).

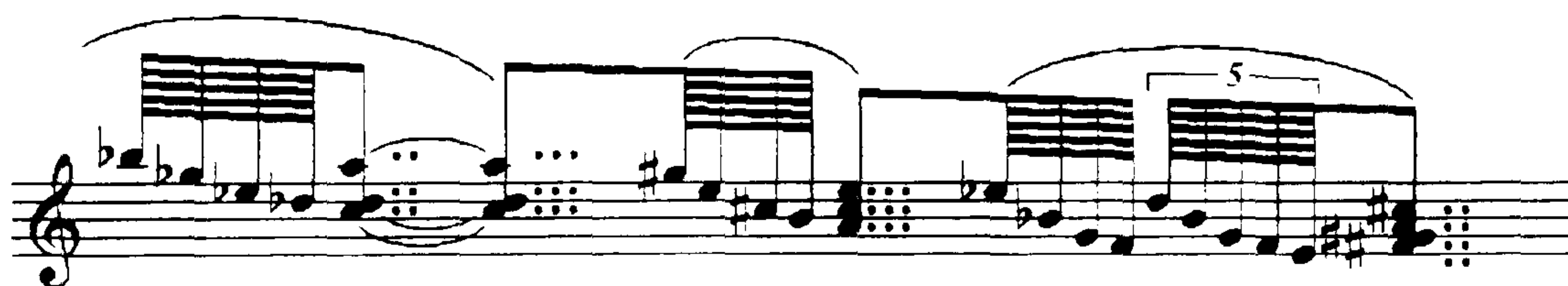


Fig. 17. Incorrect numbers of beams and augmentation dots in Piano Symphony No. 4, page 4

Often these rhythmic “snaps” are extreme, with as many as four augmentation dots being employed; the use of large numbers of short note-values and / or ambiguous part-writing may also obscure matters.

Some errors may be discovered because the passage in question is anomalous given its context, as in fig. 18. Here it is clear that these apparent triplets at $\neg x \neg$ are erroneous because they are counter to the otherwise regular note-against-note *perpetuum mobile* that is part of the formal design of this movement.

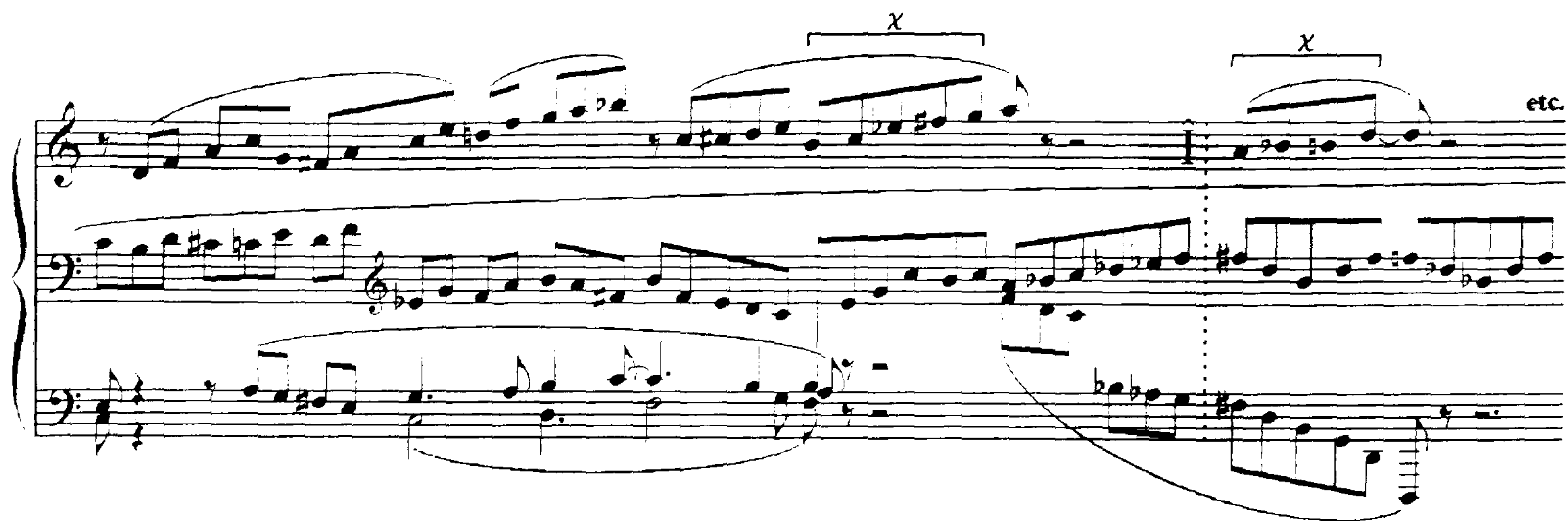


Fig. 18. Anomalous rhythms in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 139

From an examination of the manuscript at this point, it seems likely that the anomalies in this passage were the result of (and were subsequently overlooked due to) poor vertical alignments. As mentioned above, this is another source of inaccuracy in Sorabji's manuscripts, particular when the parts involved cross and are rhythmically free and / or syncopated. The first bar of page 235 of Piano Symphony No. 2 is another typical example of such a troublespot (fig. 19).



Fig. 19. Approximate alignment of parts in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 235

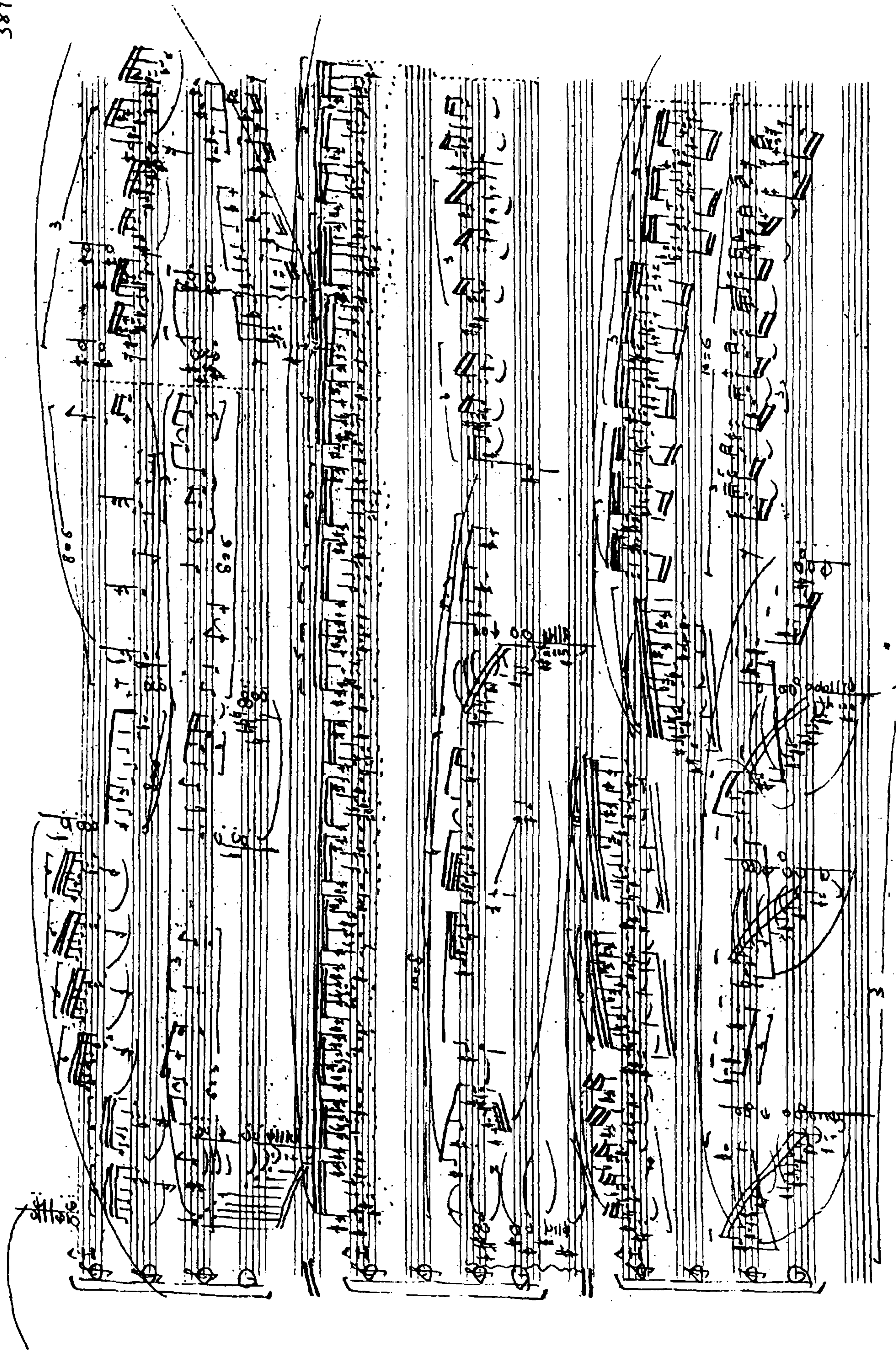


Fig. 21. Awkward positioning of grace-notes in Symphonic Variations, page 381

The Inadequacy Of Notation To Express His Ideas

The interpretation of various ornaments and grace-notes has aroused controversy throughout much of Western musical history. One familiar point of contention is the question of whether grace-notes are to be played on or before the beat. Sorabji makes use of each of these interpretations, and the difference between the two cases is bound up with the matter of alignment.

By far the majority of Sorabji's grace-notes take the form of written-out arpeggiated chords. The manner of interpreting these must be judged from the way in which they are positioned in the manuscripts as there are hardly ever any precise instructions as to realisation, fig. 23 providing a rare example. Those to be performed *before* the beat are therefore generally clear-cut: the only problem occurs when there is insufficient space in the autograph for the required number of notes. By contrast, the matter becomes more difficult in those instances when Sorabji apparently wishes the grace-notes to be played *on* the beat—simultaneously with other parts. The problem in such cases arises from the fact that he writes out the notes as he expects them to be played—i.e., aligned with the beginning of the beat and continuing forwards—and so when other parts of the texture are simultaneously active the alignment is visually confusing, as fig. 21 illustrates. There are even cases where grace-notes have to start *before* and continue *on* the beat (fig. 22).

Unfortunately, there seems to be no ideal way of renotating such passages in a way that preserves the intended meaning while removing confusing alignments. In some cases it would be possible to replace the grace-notes with arpeggiated chords (with an upward- or downward-pointing arrow accompanying the arpeggiation sign as necessary), but there are at least two situations where this would be unsatisfactory:

1. When the grace-note passage includes chords;
2. When a *Bebung*, or repeated note, appears within the passage

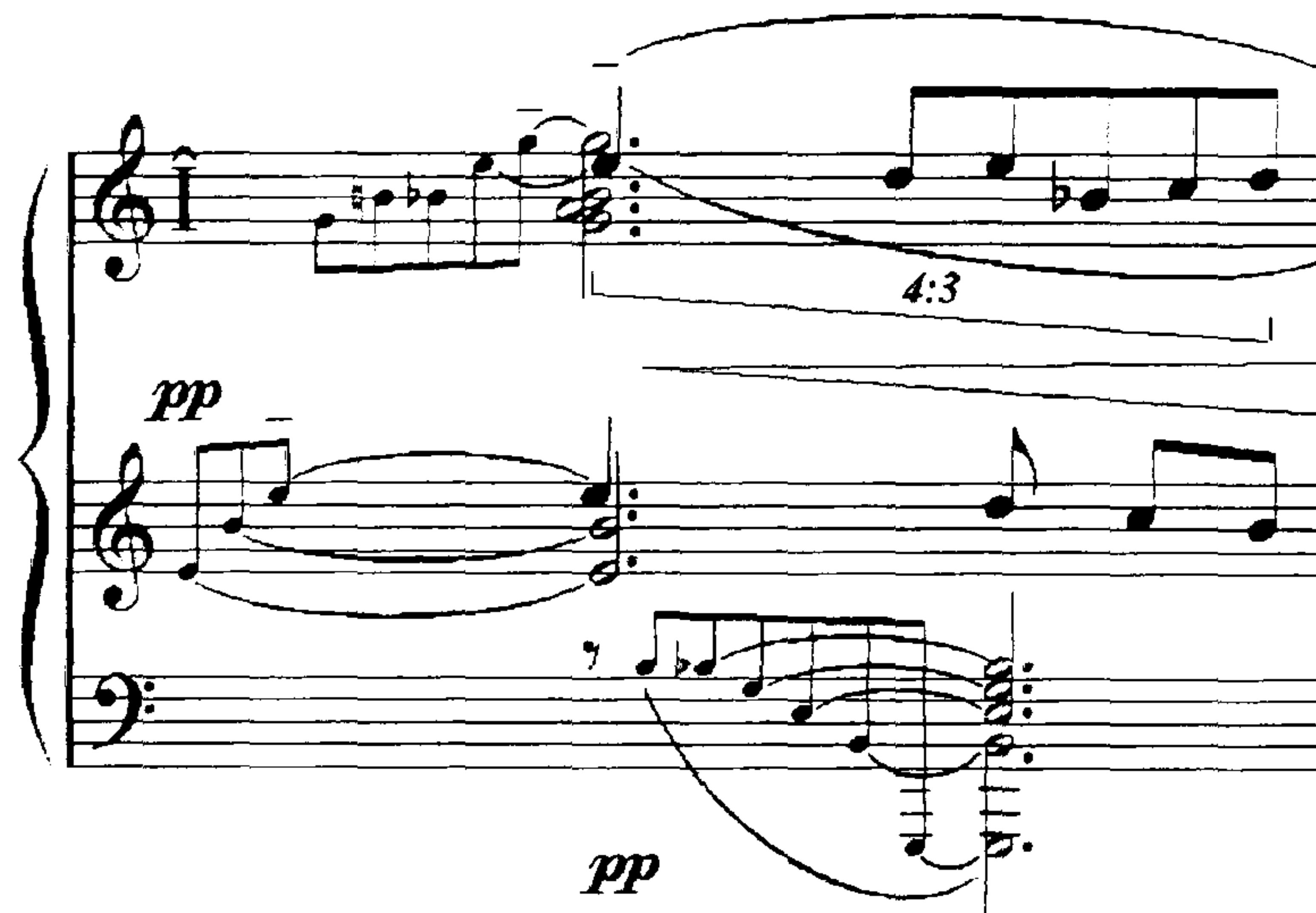


Fig. 22. Notation of grace-notes in Opus clavicembalisticum

Similarly problematic would be those passages that included chromatic alterations: for instance, a C immediately followed by a C#. However, this would at least be possible, if awkward. The use of dotted connection lines to indicate the notes or chords to be played simultaneously would generally be impractical due to the frequent length of Sorabji's grace-note passages: occasionally taking up as much as half the length of a system.

On at least one occasion—in Opus clavicembalisticum—the composer finds a solution by giving written instructions on how to perform the arpeggios and putting a bracket around the chord in the top staff to indicate *non arpeggio* (fig. 23), but this is a somewhat clumsy way of resolving a situation that ideally should be apparent solely from the visual appearance of the notation.



** si suona la parte superiore
dell' accordo col basso E \flat*

Fig. 23. Instructions for execution of grace-notes in Opus clavicembalisticum

Perhaps the only solution that could apply to all cases would be to give the grace-notes “real” values and write them out literally as they are supposed to sound (as one might write out a trill, for instance), possibly retaining a smaller type-face to indicate their ornamental nature (fig. 24).

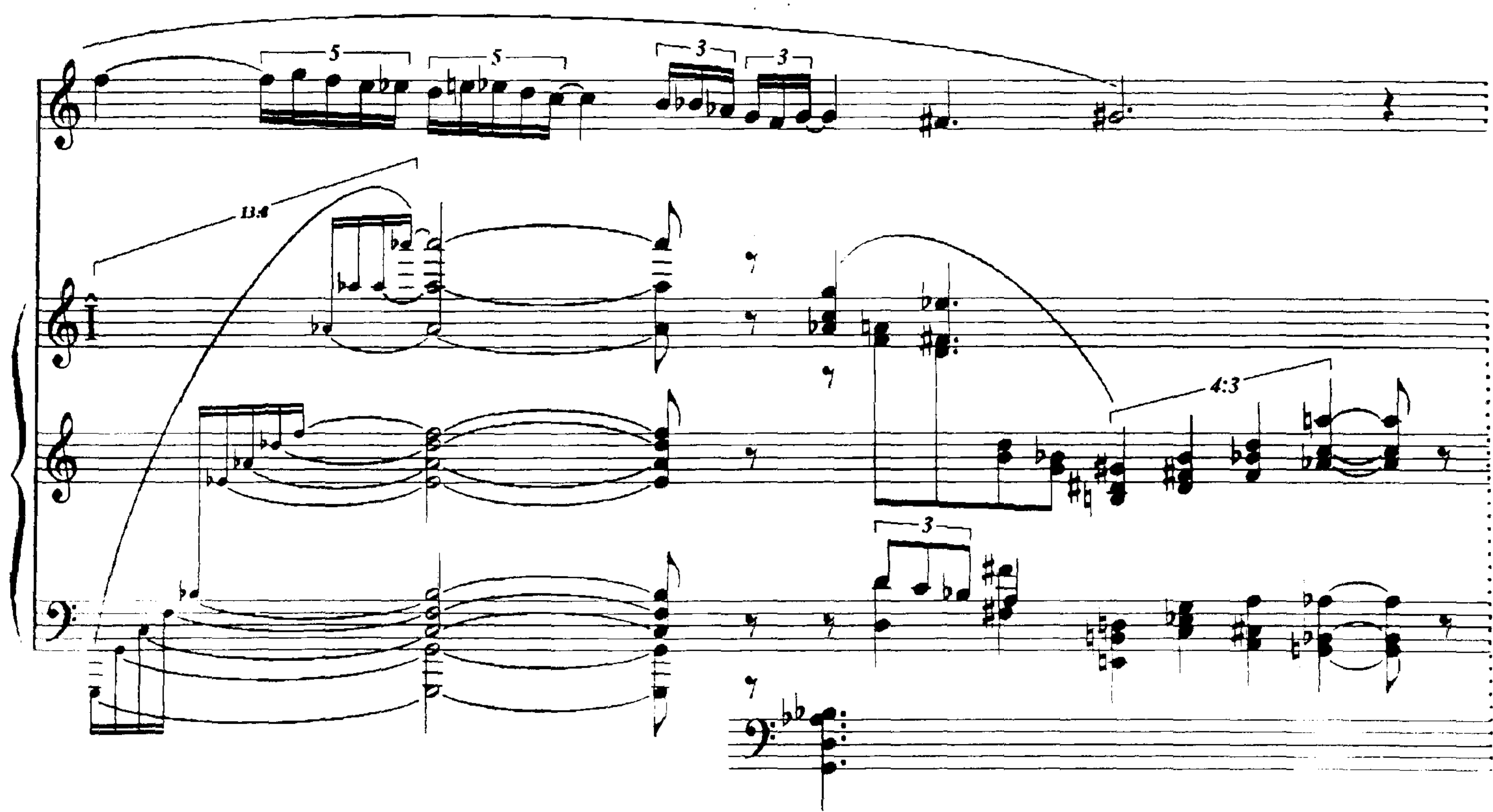


Fig. 24. Written-out arpeggiation in Movement, page 3

“Deliberate” Mistakes

It may seem surprising that a composer should have a conscious desire to introduce inaccuracies into his work, but this is exactly what Sorabji appears to have done in certain places. These self-inflicted faults in his notation are perhaps best thought of as idealised symbols rather than outright mistakes; he will sometimes employ values that are too large or too small for their position in the score. Such “mistakes” occur with sufficient regularity within particular contexts for it to appear that they are actually intentional distortions rather than slips of the pen. What makes them particularly worthy of study is that they reveal his dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of Western notation for expressing his ideas, and his occasional difficulty in translating music from its conceptual form into a construction that might reasonably be executed. They fall into two main categories:

1. Approximate values used to account for durations that cannot be expressed conveniently by a single note or rest, either because the duration is irregular (e.g., five or nine beats), or because it is very long (greater than fifteen beats).
2. Idealised values used to preserve a thematic statement that would not otherwise fit into the texture.

In other words, both categories use idealised note-values, but one is in response to the restrictive nature of Western notation, while the other is an attempt to circumvent the rhythmic constraints of thematically dominated textures. It will be convenient to examine these categories in more depth using two case studies, taken from Piano Symphony No. 2 and Piano Symphony No. 5 respectively. This will illustrate not only the advantages and disadvantages of Sorabji’s manipulation of note values, but also how his tinkering sometimes threatens the stability of the compositional design.

Approximate Note-Values And Rests

Fig. 25 shows how, in parts of the Toccata section of the fourth movement of Piano Symphony No. 2, Sorabji sometimes assigns a regular value to an irregular grouping of notes:

(i) bars 1-2

Toccata

(ii) bar 38

(bar 38 cont.)

Fig. 25. Approximate note-values in Piano Symphony No. 2

In the first part of bar 38 (fig. 25ii) each group of five semiquavers is considered to have the value of a crotchet (as though they were 5-tuplets), while in the second part a minim incorporates nine semiquavers instead of the usual eight (with brackets once again being used to clarify this arrangement within the beat). This removes the need for tied notes that may or may not suggest certain inappropriate metrical inflections; the score is clearer visually, despite its literal inaccuracy. However, if we now consider this passage in the context of the entire Toccata section, we can see that this approximation of note-values sometimes conflicts with other aspects of notation, in this case polyrhythms. The idealised note-values in bar 38 could be explained if the groupings in the upper parts were read as tuplets: seven groups of 5-tuplets, followed by four groups of 9-tuplets. This is in fact what seems to be suggested by the figuration at the outset of the Toccata (fig. 25i). However, there is reason to suppose that it is the notation in *bar 1* that is faulty, and that the tuplets should actually be unmodified semiquavers that happen to be arranged in groups of five.²⁵

Use Of “Idealised” Note-values In A Thematic Context

Sorabji’s other main use of “idealised” note values concerns thematic entries. In such cases a rhythmically inappropriate note will be used to preserve the original form of a theme; it is therefore a prioritisation of the thematic aspect over the harmonic or rhythmic constraints of a passage. The idealised minim in fig. 26 is present in the autograph of Opus clavicembalisticum; it remained uncorrected in both the

²⁵ We can be reasonably certain of this since the use of tuplets here would disrupt the rhythmically stable quasi-*moto-perpetuo* style that is a characteristic of this type of movement.

publication proofs and the final edition, even though Sorabji took the trouble to correct a separate misprint in the same bar in the proofs.²⁶



Fig. 26. Idealised note-values in Opus clavicembalisticum

Due to the emphasis on thematic elements this type of rhythmic idealisation is particularly to be found in strict contrapuntal passages (but a similar manipulation of thematic values may be seen in fig. 10). Obviously in such circumstances the nature of the theme itself places limitations as to what can or cannot be combined without rhythmic modification. What Sorabji did is not necessarily unreasonable in theory, since music of the time was already demonstrating the acceptability of combining thematic parts without regard for traditional clashes in harmony; however, in practice this approach merely highlights the tension between what is possible *on paper*, and what is possible *in performance*—i.e., the visual aspect versus the aural aspect.

This tension is particularly clearly expressed in the climax of the fugue from Piano Symphony No. 5. This is a two-part fugue that follows Sorabji's standard formal procedure (see chapter 5), but the subjects are unusually closely related: the second subject uses the same pitches (with two exceptions) as the first, but different

²⁶ The tenor F♯ had been transcribed mistakenly as G♯.

note values (fig. 27i). With this thematic integration it makes compositional sense for the two subjects to be combined at the climax. Unfortunately, the note values do not allow them to be juxtaposed conveniently, so he “idealises” a couple of the minims (fig. 27ii). What will be noted is that although this idealised combination works on paper (purely in the sense that we can see what he intends), any attempt to play the passage *as written* disrupts both the identity of the first fugue subject and the underlying rhythmic pattern that has been set up. Although this is an extreme example, it is passages such as these (especially when written during the period of the ban) that makes it tempting to believe that Sorabji was composing “music” that was never intended for actual performance, or perhaps even to be played at all.

(i)
1st subject:



2nd subject:



(ii)



Fig. 27. Disruptive use of thematic idealisation in Piano Symphony No. 5, page 109

Compositional Problems

In addition to those problems that are specifically to do with notation there are also a number that might be categorised as potential compositional problems.

Sorabji's use of idealised note values might have been included in this category, but they were apparently deliberate; these, by contrast are surely not. While the nature of these errors reveals roots in the way that the music was notated, rather than the way in which it was formally designed, they undermine the coherence of the music, and often make it difficult to decide how to proceed.

There is often to be found within individual movements and sections of Sorabji's scores a wide range of note-values. For much of the time this is explained by the frequent absence of tempo markings; in the vast first movements of the Piano Symphonies, for instance, there are generally slow nocturne- or aria-like sections within a prevailing moderate to brisk tempo. This is demonstrated in the unusually well-marked first movement of Piano Symphony No. 4, where *adagio* and *tranquillo* sections alternate with parts marked *ravvivandosi* or *di nuovo animato*. However, there occasionally appears in his compositions a shorter passage in which the note-values seem out of place in relation to the surrounding music. One example may be found on pages 202–203 of the Second Piano Symphony, where a bar of hemidemisemiquavers and semihemidemisemiquavers (128th notes) is surrounded by others composed of crotchets, quavers and semiquavers.

Similar anomalies have been identified in some works by Sorabji that have already been edited. On page 10 of Chris Rice's 1992 edition of St. Bertrand de Comminges "He was laughing in the tower" there appears the following note: "The note-values on the remainder of this line (which are given as in the manuscript)

appear to be a mistake, as they are impracticably fast. The editors suggest a doubling of all note-values between * and †.” On page 23 of Marc-André Hamelin’s 1993 edition of Gulistan there is a similar note saying: “This bar (and this bar only) is obviously meant to be played at half-tempo (i.e. twice as slowly).”²⁷

Again, this particular type of problem points to a break in the continuity of the work, in realisation if not in conception. It may suggest a difficulty in relating the sound of a work to its notation, not helped by his disinclination to use a piano while composing (see the remarks by Philip Heseltine quoted in chapter 2), or it might even indicate a disinterest in music except as a conceptual problem, calligraphic exercise, or doodle—at least during the period of the ban.

Similarly problematic to those who would perform his music are rare instances where Sorabji actually skips a beat or more of music. Examples of such slips may be found in the passacaglia of Un nido di scatole—on page 14 of the manuscript (variations 7 and 10); we can see another instance on page 16 (variation 21), where he obviously made the same omission, but this time noticed it and crammed an additional beat into the tiny space available. Significant examples of such omissions from thematic statements in the published works may be found in the passacaglia movements of *Organ Symphony No. 1* (page 25: var. 60) and Opus clavicembalisticum (page 167: var. 33).

There are also several occasions in the piano music where the writing goes beyond the compass of the instrument. Pages 17 and 79 of *Piano Sonata No. 4* both have instances of this, and it is clearly implied (although the absence of sharps on the

²⁷ Both of these editions, which are handwritten, with annotations and corrections by their editors, are available as photocopies from The Sorabji Archive, Bath, England.

top notes leaves it open to interpretation) on page 2 of Le Jardin Parfumé (pages 6–7 of the published score).

It is inconceivable that Sorabji was unaware of the compass of a standard concert grand; this was, after all, his own instrument, and his familiarity can be seen in his remarkable sensitivity to the effects of dynamic, tone colour, and pedalling that can be employed. He was always very interested in experiments and developments of piano building (for instance, the experimental Janko keyboard),²⁸ and, significantly, he was quick to specify use of the Bösendorfer eight-octave concert grand in many of his later works in order to take advantage of the sub-contrabass register. This being the case, the only possible reason for his apparent lapses is that he was again using a type of “idealised” writing: this time writing for the instrument he *wished* he had available (and perhaps in the hope that it would one day appear). This will be discussed in chapter 6.

Conclusion

This overview of Sorabji’s notation has had to limit the number of examples provided for each problem, but it quickly becomes evident that the large number of errors found by Kevin Bowyer in the manuscript and publication of *Organ Symphony No. 1* is by no means untypical. It is clear that many of the problems in Sorabji’s scores are the result of the tension between the freedom of his developing compositional style and the conventions of traditional notation. It is equally clear that while he sought to overcome this tension by developing alternative methods of notating his ideas his inability approach this task logically, or to employ consistently

²⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Towards A New Piano”, Musical News and Herald, 13 September 1924, 216–17.

any one system, created as many problems as it attempted to solve. Finally, there is little doubt that the speed at which he apparently wrote down his ideas also contributed to inaccuracy, as did his reported tendency to work “without looking ahead or back”.²⁹ This is perhaps the most important factor to consider. While it is not unreasonable to expect mistakes to appear when producing a score, especially scores as complex as Sorabji’s generally were, it is less common to find the composer apparently declining to correct these mistakes at a later date.

Chapter 4 will consider why the mistakes outlined here were (on the whole) not corrected, either at the time, or subsequently. This is obviously a particularly critical question where the publications are concerned: we cannot argue here that Sorabji deferred the matter of corrections because there was no prospect of his music being performed (thanks to his own ban). Moreover, as we shall see, his unwillingness to check his work was in sharp contrast to his treatment of his scores purely as documents: he was, for example, determined to have his manuscripts protected by lavish bindings. This being the case, some time will also be spent considering what the nature of these works really is: are they pieces, or are they private documents with no pretensions towards a sounding result?

²⁹ Derus, “Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 247.

CHAPTER 4

CORRECTIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PUBLICATION

The previous chapter demonstrated that there is more to the genesis of Sorabji's compositions than the descriptions of writers such as Kenneth Derus might lead us to believe. Composing was by no means an effortless process, despite the speed and confidence with which it was apparently performed, and it certainly did include plenty of mistakes where notation was concerned. And yet the presence and number of these mistakes in his manuscripts are not necessarily significant on their own, even though some of them are sufficiently serious to threaten musical continuity; it is rather the fact that they were not corrected in many cases, even when his work was published. This is all the more interesting when one considers the circumstances of Sorabji's own performances as discussed in chapter 2. The composer was confronted by his own errors in notation when playing works such as Opus clavicembalisticum in public. To what extent did they affect his playing? If he really was paying attention in performance to what he had written he would have been forced to make numerous impromptu alterations to overcome the troublespots in the manuscript; why did he not use the experience to modify the score when it came to be published?

The first part of this chapter will consider some of the reasons why he did not correct all the problems in his manuscripts and publications that have been discussed in chapter 3. Since there *are* some corrections to be found, the possible reasons for these will also be examined. Part two will focus on the implications of this inconsistent treatment of his scores and how they relate to both personal and professional circumstances: given the problems that remain, and the attitude conveyed

by the ban on public performance, can we believe that these scores were written down with any kind of performance in mind?

Treatment Of Mistakes

Corrections Made By The Composer

It is useful to divide the consideration of this issue into two sections, treating the manuscripts and the publications in turn. By considering when and what type of corrections were made in each, and under what conditions, we may be able to gain some insight into his reasoning and attitude where the literal accuracy of his scores was concerned.

Inevitably the scope for discussion of the treatment of his publications is limited, since relatively few of his works were published during his lifetime. Of these, all (apart from the Fantasiettina¹) were of works composed before the advent of the ban. However, there are enough published scores for us to be able to note certain key differences between the treatment of problems in his manuscripts and published works—or rather the extent to which the publication process affected this treatment.

Manuscripts

Of the problems originally present in the manuscripts, the majority of those that were actually corrected were instances where the writing was obscured in some way, perhaps by an ink blot or smudge. In other words, they are generally imperfections in the presentation of the notation, rather than literal errors. Similarly, Sorabji occasionally felt the need to clarify the identity of a note or chord by writing its name

¹ This appeared in a performing edition late in the composer's life (Aylesbury: Bardic Edition, 1987), but he did not proof-read it or directly assist in its creation.

next to it, either because it is unclear whether the noteheads lie on a line or space within the staff, or because an associated accidental is difficult to read or badly positioned. Sometimes he ran out of space at the end of a line and extended the staff lines freehand—with a resulting reduction in the clarity of the notation. However, as was so often the case with his treatment of notation, he did not resolve textual ambiguity consistently; many more situations remain where the identity of the notes remains unclear, although this is to some extent a subjective issue that is less of a problem when the reader becomes more familiar with his handwriting. In all these cases the handwriting suggests that annotations were made at the time of composition, rather than at a later date.

Somewhat less common are those instances where Sorabji apparently changed his mind about an entire passage (i.e., a significant body of the music itself). The clearest and most extended example of this is a very early work, the unpublished and unnumbered Sonata for piano (1917). This is unusual in that large tracts of the writing were rejected by the composer and crossed out. Again, judging by the handwriting, this appears to have been done at the time of the composition, and once more this would seem to contradict the manner of composition described by Kenneth Derus. A later example, in a mature work, may be found in the fugue from Piano Symphony No. 1 (page 217 of the autograph). Here, a bar and a half of music headed “*Stretta prima*” has been enclosed in brackets and the word “Erratum” scrawled over it (fig. 28). The context of the passage—its position at the latter part of a system, along with a set of arrows leading to the revised continuation on the next line—indicates that this was corrected at the time: the incomplete nature of the excised bars confirms that Sorabji must have realised his mistake as he was writing it out.

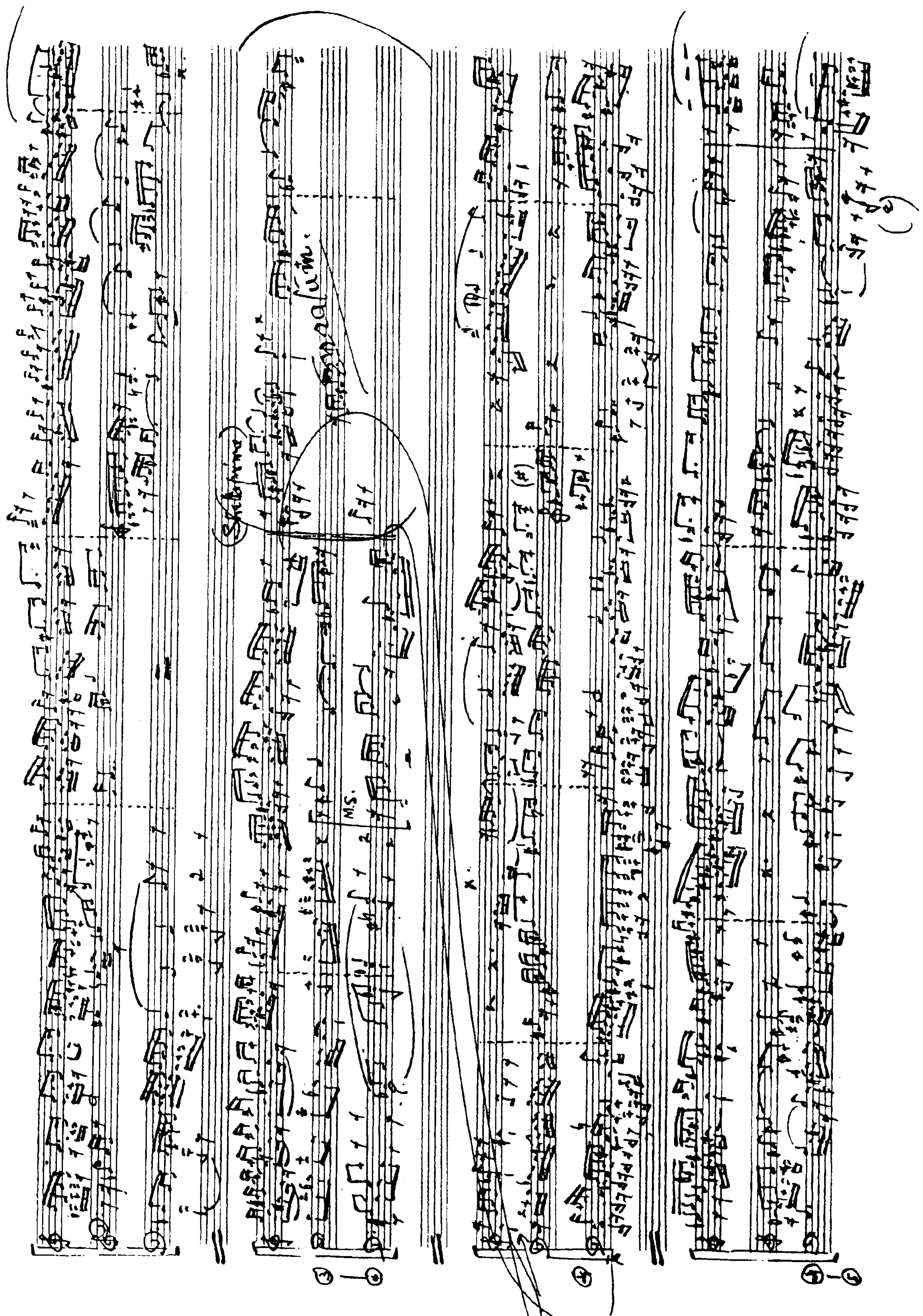


Fig. 28. A revised passage in Piano Symphony No. 1, page 217

The mistake in question is a compositional one, concerning form: he began the Stretto section in this first part of the fugue too early. Sorabji's fugues follow a standard formal design (see chapter 5), and according to this scheme the Stretto section appears after the subject has been treated in its four main parts in each voice in turn. The problem here is that this fugue has five voices: he started writing the Stretto after the appearance of the *cancrizans inversus* in the alto, when he had yet to introduce it in the tenor and bass. Once he realised what he had done he rewrote the passage and delayed the Stretto until after the bass entry.

These are all occasions where Sorabji appears to have made corrections or clarifications at the time of writing (judging by the handwriting involved, which is invariably consistent as to period). However, there are virtually no instances in the manuscripts—as opposed to the publications—where significant corrections or major alterations appear to have been made some time *after* composition (again judging by handwriting).² In fact, subsequent markings of *any* kind are uncommon; one exception being the manuscript of Djami. Here, several additional comments—all expression markings—have subsequently been added to the score on at least two separate occasions. The handwriting in this case suggests that they date from late in Sorabji's life, probably some time after the mid-1970s. Michael Habermann visited Sorabji in August 1980 and played this work to him then. Possibly these markings were a response to Habermann's interpretation; he was reportedly very impressed by Habermann's playing.³

² For the purposes of clarity we might define this point as being when he had signified a work's completion by having the manuscript bound and / or moving on to start work on another composition.

³ A brief account of this meeting can be found in Michael Habermann, liner

The only other remarks or changes that Sorabji made at a later date were to title pages. These generally took the form either of a change or obliteration of a dedication,⁴ or of instructions specifying who was to receive the manuscript after his death. The latter were, of course, only added very late in life.

Publications

Where corrections were made at a later date these tended to be in the publications only. Unfortunately, these attempts at textual accuracy were not always completed. As Kevin Bowyer has suggested (in connection with the First Organ Symphony), Sorabji did not always finish proof-reading his work for publication, and in any case rarely did a thorough job.⁵ However, it is the score of Opus clavicembalisticum that offers the clearest insights into his attitudes towards corrections and adjustments, where the published edition was concerned. While his attempt at proof-reading was once again imperfect, a comparison of the publication proofs with the final copy reveals that, unlike the Organ Symphony, only some of Sorabji's corrections were adopted while others, for no apparent reason, were not. The faults of the published version are further highlighted by the composer's "working

notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Michael Habermann plays Sorabji: The Legendary Works, Michael Habermann (Élan, CD82264, 1995). Habermann went on to give the American premiere of Djami at the Peabody Institute, Baltimore on 20 November 1980.

⁴ His removal of the dedication of Piano Sonata No. 5 to Bernard Bromage spills over into the score itself, with the letters above the notes that signify the name of the dedicatee being covered by heavy blots. Such changes were generally made if the original dedicatee died or if the friendship ended—as with Bernard Bromage and Frank Holliday.

⁵ Bowyer, 283.

copy” of the piece—which also serves to emphasise Sorabji’s own inadequacies as a proof-reader.⁶

As is the case with the proofs, many of the published errors in the “working copy” remain uncorrected, while others are dealt with. It would be useful to know for sure whether the corrections were made all at one time, perhaps immediately after publication, or whether some were added later. If the latter were the case it would indicate that he looked through his completed scores regularly and made adjustments as and when he noticed anomalies in the writing. If it was the former then we may consider the “working copy” to be the result of a post-publication proof-reading, which was similar in nature and accuracy to the first.

There are, however, a couple of more interesting modifications. One such is an alternative ending to Part I of the piece. This allows the composition to end at this point, so that the first part forms a self-contained work. The real significance of this, and the isolation of other sections of the Opus that the composer apparently toyed

⁶ This fascinating document is one of a limited edition of twenty-three copies of Opus clavicembalisticum that were specially printed on handmade Whatman paper at the time of the publication. Each of these was signed and numbered by the composer, and this particular copy—number three—has the additional handwritten inscription, “Working Copy:- | with Corrections | MCMXXXII”. It is possible that some of these corrections might have been added after 1932, but the likely time period can be narrowed down to between publication and the early 1940s (we therefore cannot argue that corrections were made in response to the increased possibility of the work being performed after 1976, when Yonty Solomon and Michael Habermann were given permission to start performing his music). It was in the early 1940s that Sorabji gave the “working copy” to a friend of his, Dr. Duncan Irving. Irving subsequently lost touch with Sorabji and the location of the “working copy” remained unknown until 1996, when it was discovered—by chance—by Marc-André Roberge. As a result Irving presented it to the Sorabji Archive (of whose existence he had been hitherto unaware) in April 1997. I am indebted to Alistair Hinton for this information concerning the history of the “working copy”.

with,⁷ is that it reveals a concern for the realisation of the piece in performance—something that his inability to eliminate inaccuracies tends to obscure.

While the “working copy” does not resolve every problem to be found in the publication, it does tackle a number of them; most importantly it shows that Sorabji had at least some concerns about the mistakes in his work and was willing to deal with them (eventually). However, the obvious question remains: if he did care about mistakes, why didn’t he take the trouble (and make the time) to do something to about them *before* his works were published?

Possible Reasons For The Incomplete Nature Of His Corrections

It is impossible to be certain why Sorabji did not stop to make corrections after he had written out his scores. He never spoke or wrote about the quantity of errors in his scores, and how these might relate (or not) to potential future performances—except indirectly.⁸ While this is not particularly surprising, it forces us into the uncomfortable realm of speculation. The best that we can hope for is to make informed suggestions as to reasons, based on those attitudes and interests that he *did* express, (either in print, or via the nature of his presentation), and the nature of associated documents, where relevant. Several factors are of particular interest:

1. His urge to continue composing new works, virtually without break.

⁷ According to Geoffrey Douglas Madge, Sorabji was willing to sanction the performance of a selection of sections from Opus clavicembalisticum, and “even suggested that playing them may be more effective than playing the whole thing.” (Madge, “Performing *Opus clavicembalisticum*”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 418). It will be noted that whatever criticisms the composer was prepared to make about Tobin’s performance of Part I in 1936, he did not complain that Parts II and III were omitted.

⁸ Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 50.

2. His self-proclaimed bibliophilia.
3. His inadequacy as a proof-reader.

We also need to remember that some of the mistakes outlined in chapter 3 were apparently deliberate. Obviously it would make no sense to correct errors that were intentional to begin with. However, it requires a close study of the scores, and an understanding of his intentions regarding notation itself, to differentiate these from his other lapses.

The Urge To Compose Continuously

The speed at which Sorabji was accustomed to write certainly contributed to some of the mistakes in his music manuscripts, just as it clearly contributed to the appalling quality of his typed letters (chapter 6 will consider the significance of mistakes in his prose).⁹ However, it evidently also had some bearing on whether or not corrections were made either subsequent to or during the process of writing down the music. This was mainly due to his eagerness to start composing the next work—even if he had originally planned a period of rest.¹⁰

Why was he so eager to move onto the next work, and why did he have to work at such speed? As he was working only for himself he had no need to proceed at such a pace: he had no deadlines to meet. On the other hand, as chapter 2 has already

⁹ As we pointed out in chapter 2, this speed is evident from the dates given at the end of virtually all his manuscripts; other dates appear occasionally at the end of individual movements within the larger works. In addition to Derus, a number of other writers have drawn attention to this compositional celerity. Some further evidence may be found in letters to Sorabji's friends that refer to the progress of a work, most notably the correspondence between the composer and Erik Chisholm during the creation of Opus clavicembalisticum.

¹⁰ See the discussion in chapter 2 concerning Opus clavicembalisticum and Symphony II.

illustrated, he apparently “found that he *had* to continue”,¹¹ and that “I could not stop myself”.¹² To be sure, such statements are from second-hand reports, but the dates on his scores speak for themselves: the manuscripts were produced quickly, one after the other, with little time in between. Perhaps we may find an answer in the chapter “Yoga and the Composer” from his book Mi Contra Fa, with his remark that “the symphony will not be denied, or being denied will perhaps not come again.”¹³ This is suggestive of a fear of losing the thread of a composition if he did not notate his thoughts on paper (however inaccurately) as quickly as possible?¹⁴ Similarly, he would not want to devote his time to detailed corrections if it meant that they would distract him from writing down new items as they came to him.

Bibliophilia

Another hint of a possible unwillingness to correct subsequently and systematically certain aspects of his writing—in his manuscripts at least—may be found in his self-confessed bibliophilia. This is manifested in several matters relating to the composition and presentation of his work. For example, in his discussion of Sorabji’s correspondence with Erik Chisholm, Paul Rapoport refers to an incident

¹¹ Gray-Fisk, 230.

¹² Polkinhorn, liner notes for Fantaisie Espagnole.

¹³ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 74.

¹⁴ What is interesting about this is his lack of sketches. Given this desire to get his thoughts down on paper as quickly as possible one might have expected him to produce vast numbers of sketches as ideas came to him. Perhaps his tendency to plan the structure first and only add the musical essence last of all (see chapter 2) may account for this. Or, to put it another way, once he started writing the music he found it difficult to stop (i.e., to break the process down from an ongoing whole into smaller sections for more detailed work and refinement). In this sense his scores are both sketch and “finished” product in one document.

occurring during the composition of Opus clavicembalisticum that was apparently of great importance.¹⁵ Sorabji's letter states:

A horrible possible tragedy! the new paper I shall have to use shortly is not quite the same size as the Italian I have used [hitherto] but is about 5/8 of an inch wider—and 1/2 inch narrower. This means an execrable and hideous botch when the work is bound up—I wait in fear and trepidation to see [if] it can be got over by guarding the narrower paper at the back throughout or some such dodge—else there will be nothing else for it but for me to grit my teeth hard and copy out the ninety pages I have already done on other paper—for a book such as it might be is simply unthinkable to a fastidious bibliophile and the sight of it would be a constant eyesore[,] shame[,] and irritation to me—for in addition to my other vices I am a bibliophile per sang [and] the sight of a beautiful book badly bound[,] used[,] or treated rouses in me a fury that cruelty to animals or children does in less tender-hearted people.¹⁶

He reveals the outcome in a later part of the same letter (in a section dated the following day):

Thursday 24th. Hallelujahs! “Gladfulness!” as you would say! This morning I betook me to the great Zaehnsdorf, the bookbinders and had weighty discourse with them àpropos the differing sizes of the two sets of paper for the Opus Clavicembalisticum: they can get over and round it so that twill never notice and thus I am spared ninety pages of futile toil and the reproach, shame and disgrace of contemplating a bookbinding atrocity that no self-respecting bibliophile can contemplate without horror. Glory be! I think I will light candles to the Blessed Virgin out of sheer thankfulness! I woke up four times in the night from a nightmare consisting of a gigantic nine out of which your face leered menacingly at me, and your tail was the 0 which was like the jaws of Hell in El Greco's picture of the Apotheosis of Philip II of Spain!!¹⁷

As this letter implies, Sorabji was in the habit of having his manuscripts professionally bound. With only a couple of exceptions all the autographs remaining in his possession were eventually treated this way. A natural love of books and rare editions was probably augmented by the example of his friend Bernard van Dieren,

¹⁵ Rapoport, “Sorabji's Other Writings”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 304–305.

¹⁶ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Erik Chisholm, April 1930, private collection.

¹⁷ Ibid. (section dated 24 April).

who could not only speak authoritatively on the subject, but was also experienced at binding his own already fastidiously presented manuscripts.¹⁸ While Sorabji never took his interest to this extent, he certainly became thoroughly familiar with the art of bookbinding.

It is remarkable that a composer who took so much trouble over the presentation of his work should permit mistakes to remain uncorrected. This being the case—and assuming that he *was* actually aware of individual lapses—the only explanation that might make some sense would be that he felt that making corrections—especially major ones that involved that layout of a passage—would deface the manuscript (the publications being, of course, a different matter and to be discussed separately). One might imagine this to be especially true when the work in question had already been bound, which itself suggests that he had deemed it to be complete. Given the rather obsessive attitude suggested by the letter quoted above—namely the apparent willingness to contemplate copying no fewer than *ninety* pages of Opus clavicembalisticum onto different paper—Sorabji might well have felt that the only way to incorporate extensive corrections when a complete continuous version of the text had already been produced would be to rewrite the entire score. Clearly this would have been a ridiculously time-consuming activity, especially in the cases of the larger—and inevitably more problematic—works. This at least might help account for the presence in the manuscripts of corrections made approximately at the time of writing (i.e., while the work was still in progress) and the relative absence of those added after “completion”. The problem illustrated in fig. 28 was dealt with relatively

¹⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music: Bernard van Dieren”, The New English Weekly, 14 May 1936, 93.

easily because it had been spotted at the time; how much more difficult to correct such a significant formal issue at a later date. Moreover, in the case of the later, as well as the larger works, where there was no imminent prospect of either publication or performance, there was also no pressing need for the various problems to be addressed. And there is no reason to suppose that he was even aware of many cases, if his attempts at proof-reading his work for publication are anything to go by.

Proof-Reading

If he was unwilling to make substantial corrections to the manuscripts for fear of defacing them, then surely publication would present a golden opportunity to deal with these issues more cleanly. Why did he not do this? In fact, in those few works that were published we certainly *can* see Sorabji making some attempt to correct his music. However, as might be expected, he found the process of proof-reading a tiring and time-consuming business. None of his published scores is truly satisfactory: many errors slipped through, with the number rising exponentially with the size of the work involved. The publication of Piano Sonata No. 1 includes a brief (and incomplete) list of errata, while Kevin Bowyer speculates of the “well over a thousand” misprints in Organ Symphony No. 1 that “he must have missed the copy deadline as none of his corrections were incorporated into the score as it was finally published.”¹⁹

Opus clavicembalisticum, even larger and more problematic than Organ Symphony No. 1, provides a clearer insight into Sorabji’s attitudes and difficulties where publication was concerned. Many of the misprints present in the proofs, as well as some of the errors carried over from the autograph, were corrected at this stage, but

¹⁹ Bowyer, 283.

a large number nevertheless remained, apparently unnoticed. His lack of concentration is particularly apparent in those places where one problem was dealt with, while another nearby was ignored. For example, on page 212 of the proofs (the first bar of the second system) he added some notes to the tenor voice and a crotchet rest in the alto—which were then, as a result, included in the final publication—but it was only in his later “working copy” of the published score that he marked the accidentals \flat and \sharp in the soprano (fig. 29).

(i) Proofs p. 212

(ii) "Working copy" p. 212

Fig. 29. Corrections made by Sorabji to the proofs and published score of Opus clavicembalisticum (edition by J. Curwen and Sons, 1931)

To add to the confusion, the composer occasionally inadvertently “corrected” a passage that was accurate! On page 161, system 2, of the proofs he removes a

transposition sign (Î) and replaces it with “*loco*”—which is the correct decision—but at the beginning of the following system he crosses out another Î sign to maintain registral continuity, which leaves the previously unproblematic passage that follows an octave too low. On page 161 of his own “working copy” he reinstates this transposition symbol, which had been left out of the final published version as a result of the alteration made to the proofs.

Finally, it should be noted that of the corrections he made to the proofs of this work only some were incorporated into the score. Clearly it was not the case here that he missed a deadline; there is no obvious reason why only some alterations should have been included, unless it was due to incompetence or misunderstanding on the part of the printers, Waldheim-Eberle.²⁰

It might seem surprising that a composer should overlook so many errors in his work, but the fact that it is possible, even likely, is illustrated by the comments of Derus and others. What has clearly prompted such remarks is the fact that judging *solely by its appearance* his scores contain few *obvious* errors; it is not until a detailed examination of the notation is made (perhaps during the course of editing) that the majority of the problems outlined in chapter 3 become apparent. Even the printers,

²⁰ It is interesting that Sorabji should have chosen a foreign firm to print his work, rather than one based in London. He had a long association with Waldheim-Eberle (a reputable Viennese firm) that dated back to at least 1922. All the scores that they produced for him, especially Opus clavicembalisticum, are undoubtedly very beautiful, which would have appealed to Sorabji’s bibliophilia, but contain numerous misprints and other inaccuracies not present in the manuscripts. What is significant is that some of these misreadings are decidedly unmusical; for example, accidentals that are not vertically aligned with any note. Problems such as these, which anyone with a basic grounding in music notation should have spotted, cannot be accounted for by difficulty in reading the composer’s handwriting. In many cases (with the score of Le Jardin Parfumé containing a particularly large number of these) it would seem that the printers attempted to reproduce the appearance of the score as exactly as possible, regardless of the conventions of notation.

who were—of necessity—examining the scores at just such a note-by-note level, apparently failed to notice these problems; they merely added a few more. The reasons for this difficulty in realising the scale of the problem without an in-depth survey may be put down to such factors as the “advanced” harmonic language, the complex polyrhythmic textures, and the notation of the solo piano and organ music on at least three or four staves. There is also the point that while Sorabji’s handwriting is not particularly untidy, compared with that found in some composers’ autographs (with the exception of some of the later manuscripts written on poor quality manuscript paper when his eyesight was failing), an inexperienced reader—being unfamiliar in particular with the shape and positioning of note-heads and accidentals—may well miss details apparent to a more experienced editor. This, of course, may account for many of the misprints in the published scores: the sheer number of these in the proofs of Opus clavicembalisticum, for instance, testify to the possible difficulty that the printers had in interpreting the handwriting.²¹

Of course at least some of these points—the latter in particular—cannot be applied to Sorabji himself. However, due to his unique relationship with the music, it is possible that he might have fallen victim on occasion to the psychological phenomenon of “proof-reader’s error”.²² In such a situation his familiarity with the music—especially how he intended the music to sound—may actually have been a disadvantage. Again, this type of problem is more likely to arise when the reader is

²¹ A point that has also been made in connection with the First Organ Symphony (Bowyer, 284).

²² Sloboda, 74–77.

not examining the notation closely at a note-by-note level.²³ With the fluency of his writing and his apparent confidence in way the music was supposed to unfold, there is no reason to suppose that he found it necessary or desirable to examine his music in this way, even when proof-reading. Given his impatience with the necessity of proof-reading his scores for publication it is not surprising that a number of mistakes, both by himself and the printers, were overlooked; this particularly stands out in the larger published scores, such as *Organ Symphony No. 1* and *Opus clavicembalisticum*. This was not something unique to Sorabji; other composers have suffered from it.

Beethoven was rather more diligent than Sorabji when it came to proof-reading his work, but even he had trouble with it—and was well aware of the fact. In his article on the subject Alan Tyson quotes Beethoven’s rueful admission:

Beethoven was not a particularly good corrector of proofs—a fact that he acknowledged at times, once confessing (with a pun on the verb “übersehen”): “when he *looks over his own work* the composer really *does overlook* the mistakes”.²⁴

However, Beethoven always did his best to ensure that mistakes he had overlooked were corrected in subsequent editions; Sorabji never did this. He was more inclined simply to let the publications go out of print, since they were inaccurate, without improvements being incorporated into reprints. One major reason for this was the advent of the ban, and the circumstances that led to it, which will be discussed below, but this unwillingness to view inaccuracies as an ongoing problem (in both his

²³ Ibid. Sloboda points out that experienced musicians are more likely to fall victim to it than novices because they are able to visualise the “correct” version: the mind interprets the music according to what it thinks is “supposed” to be there, rather than what actually is.

²⁴ Alan Tyson, “Steps to Publication—and Beyond”, in *The Beethoven Companion*, ed. Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (London: Faber Paperbacks, 1976), 479.

publications and his manuscripts) that demanded additional revisions also makes it difficult to regard his compositions as completed pieces. With the ban being in force for the major portion of his compositional career one has to consider whether much of his work was *ever* produced with a sounding result in mind.

Circumstances Affecting The Composer's Attitude Towards His Work

Given the numbers of uncorrected problems and ambiguities in both manuscripts and publications (which can now not be given a definitive and authoritative solution since the composer is no longer with us), we have to consider what exactly is the nature of these works. Should they be regarded more as sketches or preliminary drafts, rather than finished products? If this is the case, is there any point in us trying to edit, perform, or simply study them?

The situation becomes more complex when we remember the unofficial ban on public performance of his works, and the fact that the majority of them remained unpublished, and even unheard of, except by friends of the composer. Is it safe to assume that the works composed during the period of this ban were ever intended for any kind of performance? Finally, if we remember the almost obsessive zeal with which he approached the physical process of writing down his compositions, and his apparent disinclination to structure the task in what might be considered a conventional way (choosing an unbroken forward progression, rather than breaking down the process into “subjobs”, building up textures, and moving backwards and forwards in the score, cross-relating and refining elements as they were gradually composed into the manuscript²⁵), might we suggest instead that he was addicted to a

²⁵ Cook, 192–95. In this sense those very aspects of the writing that Derus so admires—the continuity and apparent confidence—are actually most suggestive of a

form of compositional “doodling”, in which musical ideas were produced without being fully controlled, and were rarely corrected or refined as the process began again almost immediately with the next “piece”?

One way in which we might endeavour to answer such questions is by considering his changes in attitude, and by comparing those works written in circumstances that we might associate with a “normal” approach to composition with those produced during the time of the ban (i.e., when he refused to publish or sanction public performance of his work). In other words, is there any evidence that with the advent of the ban he stopped writing “pieces” that might one day have been published and performed, and instead “composed” (in the sense of writing notes down on a piece of paper) without any real interest in whether the notes would fit together in an aural context.

This does, of course, presuppose that there was a time when Sorabji approached composition with an attitude that we might recognise as “conventional”; that is to say, writing music and then seeking to get it published, publicised, and performed. In the earlier years of his career this may well have been the case; in addition to Busoni, he sent copies of Piano Sonata No. 1 to Schoenberg and Ernest Newman.²⁶ His letters to Philip Heseltine in particular reveal a youthful enthusiasm and eager approach to

lack of concern for the sounding result: there is an implied primacy of the visual continuity over the aural continuity, which is confirmed by many of the types of mistake discussed in chapter 3.

²⁶ The latter via Philip Heseltine. Newman’s response created something of a brouhaha between him, Sorabji and Heseltine (see Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Correspondence: Mr. Sorabji and Mr. Newman”, *Musical Opinion*, November 1920, 134–35). Moreover, as Sorabji himself points out in his response to Newman, “How any unpublished work would ever get known or performed otherwise than by showing it to someone, [Mr. Newman] does not explain.”

composition, performance, and art in general. On several occasions he discusses his plans to perform and publish his own works, and the people he has met in the process.²⁷

By contrast, his attitude in later years hardened considerably. Rapoport has provided some illustration of this,²⁸ but it is expressed particularly clearly in a letter Sorabji wrote in the 1950s in response to a query about his work:

SIR,—Mr. Warnes asks why my piano sonatas and concertos are not “performed more frequently”. (I like that “more frequently”, a pretty thought!) Well, I suppose because *they* don’t want to play them, and *I* want them to do so even less. Taking the dimmest view of public performances, and an even dimmer one of performers, I not only don’t seek but actively discourage them; and so that there may be no doubt about it at all, in what the performers are pleased, but rarely anyone else, to call their minds, I have latterly gone to the length of categorically forbidding public performance.²⁹

The transition between these two different attitudes is therefore critical. Inevitably, we cannot discern any sharp boundaries to this intervening period, but we can trace Sorabji’s growing resentment of the treatment and perception of his music by examining certain events and the way in which he responded to them. The themes introduced in chapter 2 provide a useful starting point in this respect.

²⁷ See, for example, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 2 January 1922, quoted in Derus, “Sorabji’s Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 240–41.

²⁸ Rapoport, “Sorabji: A Continuation”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 75–76.

²⁹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Finis Coronat Opus”, Musical Opinion, March 1957, 333. On the other hand, he had long been touched by the interest and support displayed by many of the readers of his articles and reviews—as opposed to professional musicians and critics: see, for instance, the detailed letter he wrote in response to the suggestion of a number of readers that a private society be formed for the purpose of recording one of his major works (“Opus Clavicembalisticum”, The New English Weekly, 10 September 1936, 350). Unfortunately, coming so soon after the disastrous Tobin performance of Part I of Opus clavicembalisticum, Sorabji was understandably wary of such a proposal.

From Sorabji's point of view, the rumours and criticism that surrounded performances of his music in the 1920s had the effect of drawing attention away from open-minded consideration of his music. Irritation over the speculation that he could not play his own work clearly could not on its own have prompted his subsequent ban, for if this had been the case then the ban could just as easily have dated from 1928 (see chapter 2), instead of some ten years later. The same might be said for the Tobin performance of Part I of Opus clavicembalisticum; it is unlikely that one isolated "travesty" could provoke such an extreme response. However, the effects on Sorabji of the criticism of his playing and the music itself—especially if it had no obvious factual basis—could well have been cumulative with the disappointments over performances by others. The fact that Opus clavicembalisticum was performed by Tobin in such a way that the music itself seemed ill-conceived (as Edward Clarke Ashworth pointed out) saw his worst fears realised.³⁰ This was then compounded by rumours that Tobin's inadequate attempt had been sanctioned by the composer, to the extent that he actually paid for it to go ahead—something that the latter vehemently denied:

It has come to my attention that a report is being circulated to the effect that I myself "paid" for a certain London performance of a work of mine early last year. I do not wish to be put to the unpleasant necessity of making public the correspondence between myself and the parties concerned regarding the performance in question, but if this impudent and monstrous allegation is repeated, I shall have to do so as well as taking legal steps to stop it. I consented to the performance in question with the utmost reluctance, regarding the auspices under which it took place with intense aversion and distaste; it was arranged over my head and without my knowledge, I being informed only when all the arrangements were completed. I was only restrained from imposing my veto by a desire not to cause loss or inconvenience to those concerned, and I refused to be associated with the occasion or to endorse it by being present.³¹

³⁰ Ashworth, 55.

³¹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "A Dislaimer", The Musical Times 78 (January

The veto that Sorabji mentions was his legal right—as copyright holder—to prevent performance or recording of his works (as stated in the score of the Opus).³² Although not a total ban, this warning reveals the way in which his mind was working, even at the time when his earlier works were being published. However, after the Tobin fiasco in 1936 he was apparently no longer willing to allow performances to go ahead, with the exception of his own concert premiere of Toccata No. 2 later that year, and this state of affairs remained until the mid-1970s.

Aside from the Tobin affair, Sorabji's music had already faced other setbacks of different kinds. The circumstances surrounding the dropping of Piano Quintet No. 1 from the schedule of Norah Drewett and the Hart House Quartet in 1925 were never made clear. The composer commented on the state of affairs in a letter to Drewett in 1929:

I have heard so many strange stories as to the reason why the work was dropped that I am making a collection of them. One, from a well known English composer, whom I have no reason to believe [he] loves me, that you all found the work impossible of performance and that it was dropped for that reason, a story so fantastic and absurd that it may be dismissed as the invention of malignant stupidity. Another reason alleged is such that it is an insult to such a body of artists such as yourself and the Hart House Quartet to reprint it. Yet a third ascribes this very reason as the motive of the removal of this work from the I.C.G. programmes. It is all profoundly intriguing and ambiguous. I doubt not that you have still more tales of supposed "reasons"?³³

1937): 60.

³² Unless he himself had already recorded it (as he pointed out in "Opus Clavicembalisticum", The New English Weekly, 10 September 1936, 350)—perhaps something to bear in mind when considering his refusal to include any of Opus clavicembalisticum in Frank Holliday's series of recordings (Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 82).

³³ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Norah Drewett, 3 November 1929. Quoted in Roberge, "Sorabji's Quintet", 104.

Furthermore, when his music *was* actually performed—and to his satisfaction—the press would either ignore it or draw erroneous conclusions.³⁴

Some time ago, at the Westminster Congregational Church, Buckingham Gate, there was played a movement (the second) from what is considered, I find, to be the most difficult organ composition in existence; indeed, many, on the strength of themselves being unable to play it—such a sound criterion—have declared it, especially the second movement, to be unplayable. Invitations to the number of between twenty and thirty were sent out to the press, but so far not one of those to whom these were sent appears to have made the slightest reference to the event—nor, so far as can be ascertained, were more than one or two present, although the hour was a particularly convenient one, between afternoon and evening, when there was nothing to clash.³⁵

One can imagine his irritation if successful concerts involving his music received little or no attention, while incompetent or cancelled performances were the cue for gossip and speculation. There is some reason to suppose that he saw all these problems as part of a conspiracy of ignorance against him, for once the first criticisms had been made they seemed to appear again and again. Sorabji had already seen this happen to other composers:

And, as in so many other branches of human activity, it is sheer ignorance, or that form of it to which those associated with music either as practitioners or as hearers are lamentably prone, namely that form of obstinate wilful ignorance, that deliberate turning away of the head from knowledge that the Buddhists call *adviya*—wilful not-knowing, which leads to the repetition of some cliché of criticism . . . which has the slenderest foundation in fact, and invariably none at all in the particular instance against which it is uttered.

³⁴ This was E. Emlyn Davies's performance of the second movement of Organ Symphony No. 1. Sorabji was highly impressed with Davies's interpretation to the extent that he praised him lavishly in a number of letters and journals. He also dedicated his Second Organ Symphony to him. Bearing in mind the composer's satisfaction with the concert it is particularly intriguing to note that this was apparently in spite of "the disturbance of balance cause by the cutting of the second exposition of the second fugue subject and the lack of time for adequate preparation."! (Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Sorabji's Organ Symphony", Musical Opinion, October 1928, 57).

³⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Organ Recitals and the Press", The Musical Times 70 (1 June 1929): 540.

Two very great modern Masters, . . . Max Reger and Gustav Mahler, are constantly being made victims of this kind of silliness. In the case of Max Reger there are certain of his works, a very small number as compared with the enormous body of his work, that are what one might call an elaborate Byzantine mosaic texture, complex and intricate in the highest degree, albeit supremely great music. Now whenever Reger is mentioned, out comes the infuriating cliché about clotted counterpoint, piled-up masses of notes, and so on and so on. It doesn't matter one hoot if the work in question be some delicate light-textured chamber work, for a mere couple of instruments, out it comes religiously. In the case of Mahler it is his "extravagant orchestral demands". These very words were recently used in connection with his Fourth Symphony, a work which contains no heavy brass at all and wood in the conservative numbers of three each (*not*, it be noted the full symphonic complement of fours). Similarly, another critic spoke of the huge orchestra demanded by the Ninth, when in point of fact the orchestration of this great work asks no more than a *normal symphonic complement*.³⁶

Where Sorabji himself was concerned the clichés concerned the unplayable nature of his scores, and—especially in more recent times—the extended duration of his music. Since—from his point of view—every concert gave the critics another opportunity to express the same opinions, regardless of circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that he eventually decided that it was easier not to let any take place. In this context at least, the ban had the double effect of removing his works from both the well-intentioned performers, and also the less well-intentioned critics who would judge them.

Moreover, the sensationalist nature of these criticisms made the prospect of further "muck-raking" (as he describes it in one of the introductory notes in the manuscript of Piano Symphony No. 1) into his work all too likely. He found obsessions with programmaticism, or the analysis of the state of mind accompanying the genesis of a composition, particularly tiresome and irrelevant, with the Tantrik Symphony for Piano Alone and Opus archimagicum being obvious potential

³⁶ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music: Delusions and Pathetic Fallacies (continued)", The European, March 1955, 46–47.

springboards in this respect (as mentioned in chapter 2).³⁷ Perhaps he saw such things as a possible avenue into his private life, which could all too easily lead to the kind of scurrilous rumours that had been directed at both Busoni (supposedly a drunk³⁸) and van Dieren (because he took morphine³⁹). Certainly his private life—in particular his homosexuality—could easily have garnered an element of scandal under different circumstances.

In addition to the professional issues that altered his outlook, there were also a number of key events that affected him on a more personal level during this period. For instance, the deaths of Busoni (1924), Heseltine (1930), and van Dieren (1936) removed the three musicians (and, significantly, *composers*) with whom he felt a particular affinity. The dynamic intellects of these friends certainly had a profound effect on Sorabji's early musical development, while the wide-ranging interests of Busoni and van Dieren were a further inspiration outside the musical sphere.

Sorabji had corresponded with Heseltine until 1922, when the increasing dominance of the Peter Warlock persona apparently led to them drifting apart.⁴⁰ He was accustomed to sharing with Heseltine both his thoughts on contemporary music and his works as he composed them. In this respect we can see Sorabji's interests echoing Heseltine's own, and it is likely that the paths into composition and music

³⁷ See also the chapter "Music and Muddleheadedness" from Mi Contra Fa, 18–40.

³⁸ See Appendix I, "Busoni's Last Illness", from Edward Dent's biography Ferruccio Busoni (London: Eulenburg, 1974), 315–16.

³⁹ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 153.

⁴⁰ Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 248–49.

criticism were encouraged, if not generated, by this friendship. It is difficult to believe that Sorabji would have pursued composition with anything like the confidence and vigour apparent to us today if Heseltine had not been there to listen to his ideas and provide a critical, yet friendly, eye in his formative years.⁴¹

Busoni, of course, had played an equally pivotal role in Sorabji's career. His positive response upon inspecting the latter's Piano Sonata No. 1 was particularly gratifying, coming, as it did, after Ernest Newman's lofty demurrer. Sorabji responded by dedicating several of his works to him, and Fantasia contrappuntistica served as the inspiration for Opus clavicembalisticum.

As for van Dieren, he had set an example in perseverance by overcoming dire personal circumstances (including financial hardship and a devastating medical condition, as well as sustained and bigoted criticism of his music) to pursue his interests and work. These interests coincided with Sorabji's own, as van Dieren's praise of Around Music, and the similarity in outlook between Sorabji's essays and van Dieren's Down Among the Dead Men demonstrate.⁴²

One of the results of this removal of key musical people from Sorabji's life was that he found himself increasingly isolated in his pursuit of a musical ideal—hence his

⁴¹ There is perhaps a parallel to be seen in the resurgence of Sorabji's interest in composition when Alistair Hinton contacted him in the early 1970s. As his dedications reveal, he now had someone genuinely interested to compose for; not merely himself. Perhaps Hinton's youth also had something to do with it: by expressing an interest without any agenda of his own he persuaded Sorabji that future generations would want to see his work, and not merely an established coterie. It may be that despite all his contempt for many so-called "professional" musicians—with the crotchety example of Delius adding to his experience as a critic, no doubt—he found some additional fulfilment in seeing his music appreciated by people with musical experience.

⁴² Bernard van Dieren, Down Among the Dead Men (London: Oxford University Press, 1935).

image as a reactionary for much of his life, and this despite having once considered himself at the forefront of musical exploration.⁴³ For a time he was able to find satisfaction in the work of composers such as Szymanowski, and his reactions to the changes in style of this composer reveal particularly clearly his own likes and dislikes, and his opinions regarding contemporary musical trends.

Although they never met, Sorabji always had a great admiration and respect for Szymanowski's music, and in November 1932 he had been looking forward to the prospect of a performance of the "piano concerto" (as he then described it).⁴⁴ In an extended article the following month in The New English Weekly he went on to extol Szymanowski's imagination and skill in a general survey of his output.⁴⁵ However, from an aesthetic point of view Sorabji's first glimpse of the score of the Symphonie Concertante in 1934 came as a tremendous shock:

I have just received from Max Eschig, of Paris, copies of the "Symphonie Concertante" of Karol Szymanowsky, and I can safely say that I have never in my life been so thoroughly shocked at the spectacle of that ghastly dry-rot, that, as Mr. Cecil Gray pointed out in his admirable and devastating "Survey of Contemporary Music," attacks so many composers of to-day long before the time at which they should be—just like the singers—approaching the summit of their powers. From a vivid poet, with an ardent and flaming imagination, expressed in a language of the most glowing colour and radiant beauty, Szymanowsky, to judge at least from the deplorable "Symphonie Concertante," has shrivelled into one of those wretched post-war "pasticheurs" whom Mr. Lambert analyses so searchingly in his recent book, and the composition in question is no more than a patchwork of most of the feeblest up-to-the-minute tricks of the Vogue-rue de la Paix composers of Paris, even down to such miserable and poverty-stricken tricks as pages and pages of piano-part in bare octaves or two apart, a device first, if I

⁴³ A belief that was repeatedly expressed throughout the Heseltine correspondence.

⁴⁴ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music: Notes on the Coming Season", The New Age, 17 November 1932, 33.

⁴⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music: A Few Remarks on Szymanowsky", The New English Weekly, 29 December 1932, 255–57.

rightly recall, initiated and run to death by Maurice Ravel. Looking at the pages of this work, it is hard to believe that it is the work of the same man who wrote the lovely “Song of the Night,” the exquisite cycle, “The Love-sick Muezzin,” the wonderful, richly imaginative and subtly coloured piano pieces, “Métopes” and “Schéhérazade.” The complete change of style is of artificial and unnatural violence; there has been, as far as I am aware, no gradual process at work (unless a dry-rot can be called a gradual process) . . . A deplorable and depressing exemplar of the effect of present-day tendencies upon all but the most strong-minded and spiritually independent.⁴⁶

The blunt tone of this quite astonishing document reveals the depth of his feelings concerning the most fashionable musical trends at that time. Given the high praise that was showered on Szymanowski’s earlier style in his 1932 article (and in a retrospective survey of his work in his later book *Mi Contra Fa*) he must have been truly taken aback to produce such a damning review, perhaps viewing it as little more than an artistic self-betrayal.⁴⁷

With the deaths (or silence, in the case of Sibelius) of most of the other key musical figures he admired—which included Szymanowski (who died in 1937), despite the reservations concerning his later style⁴⁸—Sorabji was increasingly isolated professionally, if not socially. As the extract above reveals, the compositional aesthetics that he respected were being left behind, to be replaced on the one hand by

⁴⁶ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music”, *The New Age*, 10 May 1934, 21.

⁴⁷ It appears not to have occurred to Sorabji that the necessities of the real world might also have influenced Szymanowski’s developing style, interrupting the private fantasy world that had inspired those works that were particularly favoured by the former. Sorabji seems to have been unable to grasp that just because he was free to write whatever he chose (thanks to his relative financial independence and the relative freedom of speech and expression in Britain), it didn’t mean that composers in other countries were similarly independent. This perhaps accounts also for his failure to appreciate Shostakovich.

⁴⁸ Despite the extreme reaction displayed in his review of the *Symphonie incertaine*, Sorabji’s view of Szymanowski’s overall contribution to music was overwhelmingly positive—see *Mi Contra Fa*, 178–187.

the influence of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School, and on the other by Stravinsky and his admirers, leaving him to feel like an unfashionable outsider. With there being little in the way of musical development that impressed him, either compositionally or in performance—as his characteristically forthright concert reviews frequently indicated⁴⁹—it is not surprising that he eventually felt like giving up composition;⁵⁰ nor is it surprising that his interest reawakened when someone new and genuinely interested, like Alistair Hinton, appeared on the scene. As for correcting his work, there was little incentive if publication was not likely to take place, and if composition itself became increasingly wearisome then the dry and dusty task of corrections would have been still more repellent.

However, there is one more important event of a personal nature that occurred during this period that is easily overlooked. This is the death of his father in 1932, and it is significant for the repercussions it had for both his outlook on life and the disappearance of his music from the public eye. He was—not surprisingly—bitter about the family circumstances that came to light with his father’s death, as subsequent references illustrate.⁵¹ If a close relation could have betrayed him and his

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Nazlin Bhimani’s article, “Sorabji’s Music Criticism” (Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 256–84), which discusses, among other things, his increasing weariness with the task of reviewing concerts and recordings.

⁵⁰ See his letter to Alistair Hinton, 11 April 1972 (quoted in Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 29–30), as well as the similar sentiments implied by his statement in 1953 that Sequentia cyclica was “the climax and crown of his work for the piano and, in all probability, the last he will write.” ([Animadversions], 9)

⁵¹ According to Kenneth Derus: “His father appears to have married bigamously; after his death Sorabji had to travel to India to try to straighten things out. What money Sorabji and his mother received from his father after his death came not from any inheritance but from a trust fund established in 1914. According to Sorabji, the inheritance went to the bastard son of his father’s “Indian whore”’s sister.

beloved mother in such a way then one can't help wonder at the degree to which his naturally cynical attitude towards human nature was inflamed. This also came on top of the (racial, musical, and sexual) isolation that he felt, and which had its roots in the loneliness he expressed in the early Heseltine correspondence.⁵²

In addition, there was the resulting practical consideration that surely intervened to prevent Sorabji's music from reaching the ears and eyes of the public, whether this was his desire or not. This was the cost of having his work published. Those of his works that were published during the 1920s and 30s were funded by his father.⁵³ The death of Shapurji Sorabji in 1932 had financial, as well as personal, repercussions for Kaikhosru and his mother. Although the younger Sorabji was by no means destitute, he was almost certainly unable or unwilling to bear the considerable costs of publishing consistently his later—and significantly larger—compositions. The turn of the decade alone had seen the creation of four “supergiant” works—Opus clavicembalisticum, Symphony II, Organ Symphony No. 2, and Piano Quintet No. 2—each of which was significantly larger than anything he had produced

After his father's death Sorabji referred to him more than once as ‘late and wholly unlamented’.” (“Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 215*n*).

⁵² “I am very lonely; I have no friends at all, except my mother's.” (3 February 1914). It would also not be unexpected, if he had intense feelings regarding friendship and loyalty, that these would be replaced when betrayed with equally strong feelings of resentment and bitterness (which also accounts for the replaced dedications that followed disappointment over friends such as Bernard Bromage and Frank Holliday). He was by his own admission a naturally fiery person and this spilled over into both his work (impatience) and personal attitude: “Fortunately for me I am an only child! [. . .] to have a brother or sister would make me expire with rage or be utterly consumed with jealousy!” (6 January 1914). This latter remark is, of course, particularly ironic, given what he discovered upon his father's death. Extracts quoted in Derus, “Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 203–208.

⁵³ Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 18.

ously. The remainder of the 1930s saw the production of three more: Piano Quintet No. 5, Symphonic Variations for solo piano, and Piano Symphony No. 1, which were among the largest pieces that he was to write. Undoubtedly the cost in terms of time and money of publishing such vast works would have been considerable; more so in the case of Piano Quintet No. 2, which would have required quite a few instrumental parts. The later choral epic Messa Alta Sinfonica would have been still more demanding, with its further requirement of an additional highly complex and lengthy vocal score with orchestral reduction in order to be suitable for rehearsal and performance. So, to some extent he may well have been making a virtue of necessity by refusing to publish any further scores, or to allow reprints of the existing editions.

It will be noted how these events lead up to the generally accepted start of the Second World War (around 1936–37), particularly from 1930 onwards. There is no evidence that they fundamentally affected the nature of what he was writing; they merely led to the death of his hope to *publicise* it—and ultimately even to compose it, as he had less incentive to do so from either professional or personal sources. For at the heart of this change of attitude was the realisation that his music was (as we said in chapter 1) no longer at the forefront of music or in fashion, and with the deaths of the likes of Busoni and van der Meer, and the change in style and death of Szymanowski, there was no one else to whom he could relate his compositional aesthetic. At the same time his experience as a musical critic made him despair that anyone would be able to perform and interpret his music in the way that *he* felt it demanded (with perhaps the exception of Egon

Despite the apparent relative success of his own performances (whether successful or not) he did not enjoy playing for an audience, as his many comments on

the subject confirm, and was too sensitive to criticism, real or imagined, and so it would have been inconceivable for him to attempt to publicise it on his own. Given the increasing length and complexity of his music, its publication required a considerable investment of time and money; with the by now unfashionable nature of his music, the lack of people able or willing to perform it, and the perceived lack of sympathy and open-mindedness on the part of the critics, how could he have felt that such an investment was at all worthwhile?

Conclusion

It is surely the case that however the mistakes in Sorabji's publications and manuscripts occurred, and whatever the reasons why they were subsequently overlooked by the composer when he did make the attempt to inspect his work, the change in attitude that has been traced in this chapter clearly contributed to his disinclination to check his scores with any kind of thoroughness. One might view his treatment of his "working copy" of Opus clavicembalisticum as an example of this: although he clearly spent some time initially marking misprints and other errors he then gave away this copy of the work. Did he really believe that he had corrected all the problems in the score, or was he simply no longer interested in doing so? What is clear is that with the hardening of attitude towards publicity and the opinions of others that led to the ban he no longer had any incentive to make alterations to his scores, *at least for the benefit of eyes other than his own.*

The logical conclusion one might come to as a result is that he was—at least during the period of the ban—"composing" for himself alone. The description "composing" is perhaps more doubtful under these circumstances simply because, if he was indeed producing them without any desire to have them performed, without

any inclination to make any kind of corrections or revisions, and (allegedly) without any reference to a piano or other aural context, it is difficult to accept that they were written with any care for the sounding result. In this sense their status as “compositions” (taking as a reference Busoni’s remark to Sorabji himself, made during their only meeting in 1919, that music is “to be heard”⁵⁴) is thrown into doubt: it is tempting to suggest he was writing notes, but perhaps not *pieces*.

Is it possible to have compositions that work on paper, but not in sound? Derus’s remarks would seem to indicate that it might be: the music *appears* to be coherent on the page because there are few smudges or alterations, or anything that might suggest a lack of confidence, and this leads to a remarkable visual continuity. On the other hand, when one attempts to perform these scores (Le Jardin Parfumé being an excellent example), one is forced to approximate what is written: it is impossible to play it literally as notated.

Is this sufficient evidence to conclude that he didn’t really care about what he was writing, only the physical process of writing out his “compositions”? To what extent does the underlying design of these pieces (if any) indicate a concern for compositional coherence that might contradict the impression given by his carelessness? Chapter 5 will attempt to answer this by examining the structure and design behind his compositions.

⁵⁴ See Marc-André Hamelin, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Piano Sonata No. 1, Marc-André Hamelin (Altarus, AIR-CD-9050, 1990).

CHAPTER 5

SORABJI'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE

Although the previous chapters have suggested some of the reasons for the presence of various problems within many of Sorabji's scores, we have yet to decide whether these are proof that he was unable to compose in a controlled manner. So far we have considered this question in terms of errors arising from notation, so we now need to investigate whether there is a similar carelessness in his whole approach and attitude towards compositional design and coherence. The need for such an investigation is made apparent by the presence of the misleading (if well-intentioned) remarks by the likes of Derus and Gray-Fisk, since these present a one-sided and misleading impression of Sorabji the composer. An alternative perspective is now required, even if it only serves to damn him.

It is also worth examining his output to discover whether his own compositional idiom corresponds to those points of view expressed in his critical writing; moreover, does his music tackle the same or similar problems faced by his contemporaries or is it merely as insular as his personal life might suggest? These points inevitably appear hand-in-hand, as his work as a critic ought to have given him a particular insight into (if not always sympathy with) the compositional issues and developments of the day.

A full-scale in-depth examination of Sorabji's musical language is beyond the scope of the present study; the purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of Sorabji's approach to composition and form and how this relates to the points outlined above. We begin by exploring Sorabji's choice of genre: what kinds of piece did he most commonly write? This gives us some kind of insight into his aesthetic outlook, and perhaps provides some explanation of his apparent preference for often

very lengthy and complex works. The next stage is to examine more closely his individual movements and investigate what formal structures he tended to employ, especially in the light of his frequent criticism of other twentieth-century composers, such as Schoenberg, who were attempting to reconcile new compositional languages with structural coherence. Finally, the focus is tightened still further to explore Sorabji's textures and how they are organised from the perspective of rhythm, harmony and figuration.

By attempting to define Sorabji's compositional language in this way we can also begin to make some critical judgements as to the quality of the writing on its own terms. To what extent can we discern what constitutes "good" or "bad" Sorabji?; does his music noticeably improve or deteriorate over time both in quality and success in achieving its objectives?

Definition And Distribution Of Genre Within Sorabji's Output

Early Genres And The Development Of A Quasi-Symphonic Idiom

One feature of his output that is not immediately obvious from Michael Habermann's purely generic survey of the piano music is that the majority of what were to become Sorabji's standard forms did not appear until after *Organ Symphony No. 1*.¹ Although the seeds for the later designs and formal processes are in evidence, albeit in an tentative way, three main genres dominate the early works: the song, the piano concerto, and the piano sonata.

It is perhaps unsurprising that many of the very earliest works should be songs. Sorabji had two major influences in his musical life at that time: his mother and Philip

¹ Habermann, "Sorabji's Piano Music", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 333–389.

Heseltine. His mother had herself been a singer, although she had been forced to curtail her career after marriage and childbirth.² Heseltine, another composer, was particularly known for his abilities as a songwriter. It not clear to what extent, if any, Sorabji was inspired to write songs as a result of these formative influences, but certainly they appeared more frequently at this time than any other. Later on in his career only a few isolated examples were produced as he spent more effort on producing compositions for his own instrument, the piano.

It was not long before Sorabji started directing his thoughts towards the piano, but rather than producing just solo pieces he instead concentrated on writing a number of concertos; something of a contrast to the small, intimate, song-settings. He wrote eight of these in total (with only one actually being published), of which five were completed within the first five years of his career. Again, after this initial flurry of activity his interest in the genre seems to have waned: the last concerto was completed in 1927.

Although his first work for solo piano was a sonata dating from 1917, it was not until two years later that he produced the work that he was later to describe—and publish—as his First Piano Sonata. The manuscript of the earlier unnumbered Sonata is unusual among Sorabji's scores in that it contains a large number of corrections and obliterations, but despite this apparently inauspicious beginning it quickly becomes apparent that he had found the medium more congenial to him in isolation than combined with either the voice or the orchestra.

Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear that Sorabji was instinctively drawn towards an almost symphonic style of piano writing, even in the early years of his career. This

² Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 68.

is characterised by complex textures, containing a wide variety of effects and sonorities throughout the different registers of the instrument.³ The all-encompassing nature of the piano in Sorabji's hands can be seen in its treatment in his First Symphony, a work written around the same time as the three published sonatas. Although this is nominally an orchestral work, the piano clearly dominates both the texture and the musical essence; the single-movement format, as opposed to the more conventional three-movement (fast-slow-fast) arrangement of the concertos, has something in common with the early Piano Sonatas.

The striving towards the symphonic genre may also be seen in the development of the Piano Sonatas themselves. The earliest, unnumbered, and unpublished Sonata can be disregarded at this point, as it is clearly an immature and uncharacteristic work. Although the first three numbered Sonatas are all single movement entities they nevertheless have changes in texture and mood that suggest appropriate elements of contrast and development. Sorabji was doubtful of the worth of Piano Sonata No. 1, due to what he felt was the excessive influence of Skryabin; similarly, the other two early Sonatas were blighted by the same "undesirable and too prevalent 'atonal' influences" that "disfigure" some of his other early works.⁴ Despite this, his initial pride in the Third Sonata is evident from a letter written to Philip Heseltine that describes it as "a piano symphony which I hope to have the joy of playing to my Phee at a not too distant date."⁵ It would be unwise to draw an explicit connection between

³ See also Sorabji, "Modern Piano Technique", 116–123.

⁴ Sorabji, A few further notes, 2.

⁵ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, 19 June 1922, quoted in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in Sorabji, ed. Rapoport, 245.

this “piano symphony” and the later works bearing this title, but it is interesting to note the choice of expression that Sorabji chose in his letter. It certainly seems to point once again towards an interest in treating a solo instrument in a symphonic manner.

Despite these apparent yearnings towards a symphonic idiom, when we look back over Sorabji’s output today the appearance of Organ Symphony No. 1 seems somewhat unexpected. It is his first work for organ, his first symphony for a solo instrument, and also the first work Sorabji designed with the explicit intention of occupying an entire concert programme.⁶ Most importantly, however, it is the first work to employ traditional forms such as the passacaglia and the fugue to help organise the musical design; the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue, with its altogether more Romantic and liberal approach to fugue, is hardly comparable.

But despite this apparent change in direction, and the undoubted importance of Organ Symphony No. 1 in Sorabji’s mind as his first mature work, it is in fact one of the Sonatas—the Fourth—that presents for the first time the outline of what was to become Sorabji’s basic symphonic genre. Arranged in a three-part structure—like Organ Symphony No. 1—the Fourth Piano Sonata has a first-movement “tapestry of motives”,⁷ an ornamental slow movement, and a final compound movement that concludes with a fugue (see appendix). This “tapestry of motives”, despite the now explicit and carefully organised use of thematic material, is clearly related in spirit (specifically in terms of character and use of texture) to the third movement of the

⁶ An idea referred to in both the “Shortform-Analysis” from Opus clavicembalisticum and the “Analytical Note” of Piano Sonata No. 4 (see appendix).

⁷ Sorabji, [Animadversions], 14.

Organ Symphony, which is in turn related to the earlier single movement Sonatas.

This particular type of first movement form, along with the positioning of a fugue at or near the conclusion of the work, are the most defining features of his new “solo” symphonic genre.

Following on from the design of Piano Sonata No. 4, Symphony II (originally intended as the second orchestral symphony), and Organ Symphony No. 2 are the first actual symphonies to make use of this basic structure, which is then expanded or developed as necessary. Thus a theme and variations takes the place of the slow movement in the organ work, while Symphony II places a brief, slow epilogue immediately after the fugue—this was to become a familiar device in the large scale works. A similar design is to be seen in the slightly later Piano Sonata No. 5—the last “sonata” Sorabji wrote, and comparable in scale to the largest of the Piano and Organ Symphonies—which further indicates the progression from sonata to symphony in his mind.

Only a few years after this, in 1938, came the completion of the first Piano Symphony to go by that name—the “Tantrik”—and although this is apparently divided into seven movements (named after the seven *chakras* recognised in Yoga) the movements can also be viewed in terms of three distinct parts:

1. “Symphonic Tapestry” (movements 1–3)
2. Slow movement (movements 4–5)
3. Prelude and Fugue (movements 6–7)

Furthermore, on page 151 of the autograph for this work (the end of the third movement) can be found the inscription “FINIS PARTIS PRIMA,” while the following page has a note above the opening of the fourth movement reading “Incipit

altera pars.” Both of these markings have been crossed out — presumably in favour of the seven movement “Tantrik” plan—but their very existence nevertheless suggests that the basic symphonic structure, already employed successfully in the Fourth and Fifth Piano Sonatas, Symphony II, and Organ Symphony No. 2, was how Sorabji conceived the work, at least initially.

Once this basic plan had become established in his mind, Sorabji used it consistently—with certain variations—in a number of later works. These variations, such as the ones already mentioned above, might take several forms, such as:

1. The exchange of one form for another (e.g., a variation set instead of a slow movement).
2. Varying degrees of thematic integration between sections of the work. Many of the larger works have a “motto” or “dominant theme” (as Sorabji describes the first theme of Piano Sonata No. 4) that reappears at key points throughout the work. In some others, most notably those written in the late 1920s / early 1930s, the themes from the first movement “tapestry” are systematically reintroduced during the course of a later variation set.
3. Expansion of the overall structure by adding related elements (such as additional fugue subjects or formally related sections) or subsidiary movements (possibly an introductory or linking *moto perpetuo* or interlude).
4. The further subdivision of the structure into either clearly defined movements (as in the Second and Sixth Piano Symphonies) or continuous linked sections (the Third and Fourth Piano Symphonies).

All the Piano and Organ Symphonies appear to adhere to this scheme, with the exception of the two smallest Piano Symphonies (Nos. 3 and 5). These two are

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Fig. 30. Use of the main theme from the first movement in the introductory bar of the passacaglia in Piano Symphony No. 3, page 106

One cannot help wondering why, if he was so interested in writing to a symphonic scale or conception, Sorabji did not score these works for full orchestra. This would have given him a greater range and flexibility of tone-colour, texture and counterpoint than either solo piano or organ. A possible explanation may be found in his reverence for Mahler.⁹ Describing the latter's symphonies as "the last and greatest symphonies given to the world, the supreme and final development of the form,"¹⁰ it may be that Sorabji felt that he couldn't equal them or say anything new in that particular manifestation. Instead, he concentrated on trying to convey a similar range of expression using only the resources offered by the solo piano or organ. The piano works of Ravel, Skryabin, and (especially) Szymanowski demonstrated the range of textural expression available to an imaginative composer; he had only to place his ideas in an appropriate formal context.

⁹ It had apparently taken Sorabji a number of years to appreciate Mahler: references to him in the Heseltine correspondence tend to be disparaging. It is interesting that his interest in this composer should have started to grow after the mid-1920s, when his own style was starting to mature and expand in scope.

¹⁰ Sorabji, "Music . . . Delusions", 43.

The Variation Set

The Piano and Organ Symphonies clearly represent Sorabji's most ambitious and characteristic work. However, beginning with the Variations and Fugue on "Dies Irae" (1923–26) the variation set as an autonomous work also appears at regular intervals throughout Sorabji's career and plays a major role in his output. These pieces vary greatly in scale from the massive Symphonic Variations to the much more compact Un nido di scatole, and are revealing in that they often contain examples of virtually every basic type of writing that he employs elsewhere, either as the form for an individual movement, or as the basis of an entire work. Thus we can find chorale-preludes, fugues, free fantasies, arias and nocturnes, *cadenze*, and *perpetuum-mobiles*, as well as variations devoted to purely virtuoso aspects of instrumental technique.

However, often the most interesting—and approachable—are those variations designed as pastiches or parodies. These brief and often biting satires on attitudes and styles musical and non-musical appear regularly in a variety of contexts, often as autonomous works, but are also to be found with suitably evocative subtitles and markings within variation sets. That of variation 9 from Il Grido del Gallino d'Oro is typical, and we are left in no doubt as to Sorabji's target: "*Valse impertinente. Con la grazia elefantina d'un orchestra inglese suonante un Valzer di Strauss. Pesante parodisticamente, molto esagerato.*" Slightly more subtle is *La quattordicesima* from Un nido di scatole ("*Ein kleines Heldenenorleben*"), which uses a highly satisfying pastiche of Richard Strauss's most "heroic" and angst-ridden strivings to cock a snook at both Strauss and what Sorabji viewed as the self-important crowing and posturing of the contemporary "Heldentenor". It is clear that examples such as

these are not merely compositional exercises, but extensions of opinions expressed in his critical writings and concert reviews.

Another interesting peculiarity of Sorabji's variation sets is that they sometimes contain within them another "nested" set as a single variation. For example, Symphonic Variations contains a passacaglia of 100 variations (var. 54), while Un nido di scatole incorporates one of 27 variations ("*La nona*"). Apart from being a means of musical regression, and so a larger echo of his method of building up the form of an individual movement (see below), it is a way of ornamenting, if not expanding, a large-scale structure; and as such is not unrelated to his use of single variations devoted to full scale fugues (as in Symphonic Variations, Sequentia cyclica, Piano Symphony No. 4, and Il Grido del Gallino d'Oro).

The Toccata Genre

The other major genre to be employed is that of the Toccata. Sorabji wrote four works so designated, as well as a couple of other pieces that follow its basic structure, and, perhaps more importantly, give some idea as to how this structure developed.

Writing in 1953, and referring to the first two Toccatas (Toccata No. 4 had yet to be composed; the dates of the now-missing Toccata No. 3 are unclear), Sorabji stated:

The design of these works owes much to the example of the wonderful Busoni Toccata, that is to say works of some extension in numerous smaller sections of varying character but of less weight, amplitude and (possibly) musical substance than the very large works which follow them.¹¹

In fact, it is Toccata No. 1 that bears the closest resemblance to the Busoni work. It is smaller in scope than the other Toccatas, with the relatively simple format of

¹¹ Sorabji, [Animadversions], 4.

Preludio-corale—Passacaglia—Cadenza and Fugue (Busoni's Toccata takes the form Preludio—Fantasia—Ciaccona), compared with the additional subdivisions and movements to be found in the later examples.

This expansion in scope between the First and Second Toccatas, and, more specifically, between the Toccatinetta (essentially a smaller and less developed version of Toccata No. 1) and Toccata No. 2, is interesting, especially given Sorabji's reference to Busoni. As has already been suggested in chapter 1, Opus clavicembalisticum may well play a part in the development of the Toccata genre. Although this work was overtly based upon Busoni's Fantasia contrappuntistica, it has some features in common with the later Toccatas—such as a relatively large number of movements (twelve in all), including a variation set and an interlude—which are not present in the earlier works.

As it is now missing it is not clear exactly what the structure and dimensions of Toccata No. 3 were, but Toccata No. 4 certainly appears to be more weighty in character and scope than the earlier two. It is by far the longest of these pieces and also the most complex in its design and figuration. The harmonic language is also more “advanced” than the earlier works due to a heavier reliance on extended harmonies as fundamental units. This creates a more ambivalent tonal language (insofar as “tonal” is still a meaningful description) and a resulting feeling of instability. This treatment is complemented by the references to the Occult: the subtitle of the second interlude (“Of a neophyte and how the Black Art was revealed to him”) is eminently appropriate, as is the reappearance of the “bell” motive from “Quaere”—itself based on a ghost story.

Although the mature Toccata genre is similar to that of the Symphony in that it employs a number of different forms (chorale-preludes, variations, *cadenze*, etc.), these forms are generally rather smaller in scale, reflecting the less weighty nature of the genre in Sorabji's eyes. The opening Theme and 24 Variations from Toccata No. 4 illustrates this clearly as it takes up no more than eleven pages of manuscript; many of the systems in the manuscript do not take up the entire width of the page. Although they are all important works in their own right, it is clear that the Symphonies remained Sorabji's most ambitious conceptions, and that he used these rather than the Toccatas to develop his musical ideas to their fullest extent.

Other Genres

Other genres used by Sorabji tend to be less important: there is less extensive development of material due to restrictions of scale. Some of these, such as the Fantaisie espagnole, Fantasia ispanica, Rosario d'arabeschi, and Passeggiata veneziana, are relatively short characteristic pieces in several sections, perhaps most similar in concept to Busoni's Elegy No. 2 "All'Italia". Like the Busoni work, they frequently employ harmonies and melodies that owe much to the Mediterranean spirit. Dances, such as the habanera or the tarantella are similarly prominent. These are invariably lighter works, with more obviously virtuoso writing, than either the Symphonies or Variations, but nevertheless reveal an important side of Sorabji's character: his love and respect for his "Spanish-Sicilian" heritage via his mother.

In some ways Sorabji was a composer very much in the tradition of Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Godowsky, and Rachmaninov; had he performed regularly as a pianist the relationship would be closer still. Following their example, Sorabji produced a number of transcriptions throughout his career. Some of these (such as the concert

transcriptions on Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Prelude in E_b [BWV 815a]) were adaptations for the modern concert piano of works written for other instruments. These in particular follow in the footsteps of Busoni.

Most of the other transcriptions also come under the heading of "parodies" and are most representative of the influence of Godowsky. These have already been referred to in their role as individual variations within the autonomous sets, but there are nevertheless several brief examples that occur on their own, including the 3 Pastiches of 1922 on works by Chopin, Bizet, and Rimsky-Korsakov, the Pasticcio capriccioso, and the Variazione maliziosa e perversa sopra "La morte d'Ase" da Grieg. The most extended example is the Concerto da suonare per me solo (1946), a satirical look at the inimical relationship between the piano and orchestra. These are clearly related to the transcriptions by their virtuoso writing, but contain an additional caustic bite that marks them almost as musical counterparts to his vitriolic concert reviews.

By contrast, Habermann has described the Nocturnes, Arias, and similarly entitled single movement slow pieces as expressing "the kinder side of Sorabji's character".¹² These works make regular appearances throughout Sorabji's output, and are, with the exception of the vast Symphonic Nocturne, of moderate length. However, they are virtually indistinguishable from the individual movements of the same style and titles that appear in the contemporaneous larger works, so it is perhaps more appropriate to consider them under the discussion of form rather than genre.

¹² Habermann, "Sorabji's Piano Music", Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 359.

Concepts Of Form

Introduction

The treatment of form used by Sorabji to organise individual movements is remarkably varied, ranging from the near-contrived permutations of the fugues to the quasi-improvisational quality of the slow movements, preludes, and interludes. Some clue to the motivation behind this diversity may be found in comments written over the years concerning his attitude towards form and the use to which it is put by other composers: he was adamant in his refusal to be pigeon-holed into any one tradition or fashion of compositional practice.

Sorabji tended to be dismissive of what he regarded as a textbook approach to form. Some of this distrust might certainly be ascribed to his feelings of contempt for what he perceived as the pedantry and cliquery of the English musical establishment of the day, but it might just as easily be traced to his lack of sympathy with the “click-clack” nature (to use one of his favourite descriptions) of the Classical style as personified by Mozart.¹³ It is clear that he felt that whatever limited merits such stylised approaches to composition might have had in their day, there was no point in following the same compositional models in the early twentieth-century just for the sake of it:

Now in the mouth of Germanic pedantry there is always much talk about “form.” That is all very well as far as it goes, but just how far *does* it go? Sonata

¹³ This description, “click-clack”, was invariably used derisively by Sorabji in published and unpublished remarks when referring to music by Mozart, Schubert and the like. The following is typical: “[. . . F]or me the click-clack symmetry, the rhythmic and melodic poverty (yes, even that!) of much of Schubert, Brahms or Schumann is unendurable except in the smallest doses [. . .] The symmetry and formal perfection that others find so exquisite, incomparable or marvellous, I find infuriating.” (Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 159, quoted in Habermann, “Sorabji’s Piano Music”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 337–38).

form, First movement form, Rondo form, Fugue form, all of which are discussed *in vacuo et abstracto*, as though they had some independent absolute other-dimensional existence like the Platonic *idea*. The student is given various directions and instructions as to how to write “in” sonata or rondo form, or what not; no glimmering of a suggestion is ever forthcoming that the nature of the musical ideas and their proliferation is the one and only essential driving force in moulding the form of a composition. We are, as it were, presented with a series of empty jelly or blancmange moulds labelled “sonata,” “rondo,” “fugue,” “overture,” and so on, into which the music without form and void is poured, and—if we are unlucky enough—dished up at a concert in our presence. We need not then be surprised if the resulting concoction is as tasteless and insipid as the English lodging-house chocolate or other “shape,” to which it is in essence so closely akin. . . .

One result of this monomaniacal concentration upon an abstract and non-existent “form,” as an Ebenezer Prout or a Stanford conceive it, and the illegitimate and unjustifiable narrowing of the scope of the term to those formalistic and mechanical formulae they posit, is the inducement of an incapacity in the hearer to grasp any forms that lie outside and transcend them; an incapacity to “understand” as they put it, a work in which cannot be isolated first and second subjects, development, recapitulation. Such people will say that a masterpiece of coherent musical thought and intense inner logic such as *The Song of the High Hills* is formless, a work every bar of which grows out of that which precedes it, with a predestined inevitability that is the hall-mark of the supreme achievements of art. Here it is acutely to the point to draw attention to the fact that when Delius embarks upon some stereotyped “form” in the specifically narrow musico-scholastic sense, the result is deplorable. The nature of his musical thought will just not allow it to go that way; it will not run into a blancmange mould. This has caused superficial observers and critics who know no better to gibber about Delius’s lack of technique, as though technique began and ended in a skilful manipulation of formalistic clichés, the filling of blancmange moulds! . . .

This is the crux of the distinction between organic and inorganic form; in the one case the music is forced or poured into a ready-made mould, as in the case of the Stanfords and the Parrys, and often of the Brahms too, a form that does not really arise out of any inner necessity of the music, in the other it moulds its own form, as in the case of Delius or Sibelius, or any great master of what (I think it was) Clive Bell once called “significant form.” . . .

The great Masters of organic technique, Berlioz, Delius, Sibelius, van Dieren, pursuing intensely orderly trains of musical thinking instinct [*sic*] with vital and living ideas, mould and shape their forms in accordance with the growth, development, and proliferation of these ideas.¹⁴

Michael Habermann’s survey of some of Sorabji’s typical forms—although this is by no means complete—provides an introduction to the latter’s proposed “solutions” to

¹⁴ Sorabji, *Mi Contra Fa*, 49–52.

the problems of formal development in the twentieth-century. As well as the various categories that Habermann describes, one may also divide Sorabji's recurring forms into two broad groups:

1. The quasi-improvisational forms that perhaps correspond most clearly to Sorabji's idea of "organic technique" or "significant form" as described above.
2. The "self-organising" forms, such as the fugue and the passacaglia, in which the overall form and duration is largely pre-determined by the use of certain recurring patterns.

Quasi-Improvisational Forms

Sorabji's Sonata Form And The Development Of The "Symphonic Tapestry"

Sorabji's view of the sonata, though accurate in very general terms, is surprising in that it ignores what is traditionally its most defining feature: the process of harmonic tension and resolution. Instead—particularly as his style matured—he seemed more interested in the secondary features: thematic and textural manipulation. It is these latter that tend to inspire the process of exploration that forms the first movement form of the Piano and Organ Symphonies. Some commentators remained unconvinced—when they could get beyond the technical difficulties to the design itself:

The term "sonata" is becoming very elastic nowadays. When I see the Sorabji sonatas I wonder if it has not lost its classical meaning altogether. Certainly it originally meant just "a piece," and perhaps that primitive meaning applies in this case. But Mr. Sorabji may have used the term because of its weighty tone, and because the pieces so entitled are phenomenally ponderous.¹⁵

¹⁵ David Branson, "Kaikhosru Sorabji", The British Musician and Musical News 5, no. 11 (November 1929): 312.

These remarks clearly refer to the published Sonatas; that is, the First, Second, and Third. These are each cast in a single continuous movement and appear to be primarily dramatic in conception. There is some thematic working—certainly in Piano Sonata No. 1, which has a very prominent theme—but in the Second and Third Sonatas any structural working takes place at a smaller scale, using brief “cells” and gestures rather than long-range harmonic or thematic progressions. These are not particularly successful works, mainly due to the unsuitability of this quasi-improvisatory form with respect to the greater scale of these latter two Sonatas. Sorabji had not yet learned to provide the texture with effective organisational elements to balance the freedom of the writing—or, as he put it in a later commentary on these works, “not having yet sufficiently mastered . . . his . . . ideas of ceaseless musical fabric, self cohesive and self coherent by reason of its own inner logic [and] without any extraneous support from ‘themes’ or ‘subjects’.”¹⁶

Sorabji continued to use and develop this idea of “ceaseless musical fabric” in his slow movements and the individual works of that ilk (see below), but, as we have already seen, he was simultaneously moving his sonata genre towards a grander and ultimately more symphonic conception of form. However, for the time being at least he retained the foundation of drama and conflict. In this respect he was clearly inspired by the Romantic examples of Liszt and Alkan, both of whose “sonatas” incorporate clear elements of dramatic narrative. In the case of Liszt’s Piano Sonata in B minor the origins in the classical sonata form remain apparent, despite the cyclical inspiration and influence of Schubert’s *Fantasie in C Major*, D. 790. However, Alkan’s *Grande Sonate*, op. 33 is decidedly idiosyncratic. The four separate

¹⁶ Sorabji, *A few further notes*, 2.

movements that make up the Sonate are arranged so that tempo becomes gradually slower to reflect the physical process of ageing: this clearly sidelines the traditional balance of the sonata genre in favour of a narrative. In addition, the only movement that comes close to the Classical sonata form is the second, “Quasi-Faust”, which again uses a highly modified formal structure to express more effectively a narrative—in this case a Faustian temptation and redemption—in which Good and Evil are thematically identified in the score.

Aside from Sorabji’s general interest in these composers—especially Alkan, whom, as we saw above, he particularly admired for his “orchestral” piano writing¹⁷—the Faustian subtexts of these pieces might also have appealed to his interest in the Occult (see chapter 2). Although his Fourth Piano Sonata makes no such references, its first movement nevertheless contains a similar thematic contest in which the themes appear in turn and then battle with each other for domination of the texture (see appendix).

It is understandable that Sorabji should have focussed on the thematic element, since the defining tonal relationships of the Classical sonata form were hardly appropriate to the new tonal and non-tonal languages of the day. However, this was never meant to be a modified version of sonata form: it is perhaps best thought of as a different type of form fulfilling a similar function within a larger work. In this respect, both this and sonata form deserve the alternative description of “first movement form”. It is certainly the thematic element that defines these movements as they are, for they also contain elements of other styles of writing typical of Sorabji. For instance, they are clearly related to the slow movements in that the texture is

¹⁷ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 203.

controlled by local organisational elements (see below); the themes provide a sense of momentum that is largely absent from the more static and contemplative slow movements. Similarly, in the absence of a traditional harmonic phraseology these forms also owe something to the idea behind fugal form in the way that the themes are treated: there is an exposition that introduces the themes in turn; a main section (the development, or “fabric”) that presents the themes in different configurations and combinations; and rather than a sonata recapitulation we have a *coda-stretta*, in which the themes pass in close review like a fugal stretto. This similarity becomes more noticeable in some of the later solo Symphonies (most clearly the Third and Fourth Piano Symphonies) in which certain themes are highlighted towards the end of the first movement in the course of an extended fugato section or even a full-blown fugue.

The formal outline of these movements is most clearly (or perhaps more crudely) expressed in some of its earlier incarnations. For instance, in Symphony II the sections are separated—and titled—in the score almost as though they were a series of movements in their own right. They are not, of course: each one is no more self-contained and fulfilling than a sonata exposition that has been divorced from its surroundings. Instead, the effect is of strategically placed caesuras to allow the performer (and the listener) to draw breath, so to speak. In the later works the structural divisions are less clearly demarcated, if at all: the first movement of Piano Symphony No. 5 is particularly fluid and seamless.

One result of this is that certain distinguishing features of the early examples of the form become more subtly articulated or completely sublimated in later outings. The quasi-*cadenza* sections present in Piano Sonata No. 4 and Symphony II are

largely absent from later works, unless it is in the form of the extended contrapuntal passages in the Third and Fourth Symphonies. Instead we have a movement that is apparently more tightly, yet less obviously integrated. This intention is reflected in the descriptions used by Sorabji when explaining this form: “an elaborate fabric” and a “tapestry of motives”. Habermann also refers to this use of “weaving” imagery in his overview of Sorabji’s piano music, including a quote from one of the latter’s letters that likens his music to “a TESSUTO IN SOUND, from which the threads cannot be disassociated or, if you like, disentangled without destroying the Tessuto . . . same as what happens if you pulled out strand by strand of a Persian rug until the rug qua rug no longer remained.”¹⁸ It is for this reason that there is some justification in describing these movements, these forms unique to Sorabji, as “symphonic tapestries”; for although it is not a description the composer ever used, it is surely one with which he would have felt some affinity.

The Nocturne, Aria, And Other Slow Movements

Sorabji’s slow movements, which appear both as individual movements within a larger piece and as complete works in their own right, are given a variety of titles, including “arabesk-nocturne”, “adagio”, and “poem”. However, the most common are “nocturne” and “aria”.

Unlike the “symphonic tapestries”, the thematic element is largely absent from these forms, although Sorabji stated (in his reply to a critic) that Le Jardin Parfumé contained references to what he called the “theme” of the work on almost every page (note once again the use of weaving imagery):

¹⁸ Habermann, “Sorabji’s Piano Music”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 344.

I think that even I would have hesitated before expressing an opinion so insulting to the latter as that implied in your reviewer's remark, "there is no logical structural basis at all in Mr. Sorabji's work that is to be discovered by the ordinary musician." That is to say that "the ordinary musician" cannot discover the theme around which, with its derivatives and variants, the entire work is woven—a theme worked in one form or another into the fabric of almost every page—and for no other reason than that it is not docketed off into two-, three-, or four-bar phrases!¹⁹

Replacing the theme in one of these movements there is often, as the above quote suggests, either a characteristic melody or simple motto that acts as a starting point for different kinds of ornamental writing, or a point of reference to help bind the texture together. For example, the cells *a* and *b* in fig. 31 are employed separately and together in many forms throughout the nocturne ("*Anahata cakra*") of Piano Symphony No. 1.



Fig. 31. Recurring cells in the "*Anahata cakra*" from Piano Symphony No. 1

A melody or cell of this kind is often referred to during the course of the work, though it is not always (and sometimes rarely) quoted exactly. If a melody, it generally comes closest to being repeated in its original form at its last statement (as in Gulistan).

¹⁹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Le Jardin Parfumé". The Musical Times 69 (1 December 1928): 1120.

Sorabji himself provides some clues as to the design of his slow movements, and how they relate to his earlier compositions, with a description of his massive orchestral Symphony “Jami”. In a letter to Frank Holliday he described the style of the work as “your ‘Gulistan’ raised to the nth power and translated into orchestral-choral terms with orchestration of extreme elaborateness and intricacy.”²⁰ At that time the work was presumably in the earliest stages of composition. A later, more detailed, description, written after the Symphony had been completed, draws attention to its lack of a conventional thematic structure, with the exception of a recurring violin melody that was presumably intended as a “motto”. However, what is most significant is its use of what he described in the same passage as a “self-cohesive texture relying upon its own inner consistency and cohesiveness without relation to thematic or other matters”.²¹ As we have already seen, a similar description was used by him in relation to the Second and Third Piano Sonatas, and, sure enough, Sorabji continues by referring to his use of the same textural devices in “earlier and much shorter works”.²² The problem with these earlier pieces was that there were insufficient organisational procedures to maintain coherence over an extended scale, but—as will be discussed below—in mature works, such as Gulistan and the “Jami” Symphony, rhythmic,

²⁰ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Frank Holliday, 8 November 1942, quoted in Rapoport, “Sorabji’s Other Writings”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 319. Holliday had been the original dedicatee of Gulistan, but the dedication was later altered in favour of Harold Morland after a quarrel with the composer.

²¹ Sorabji, [Animadversions], 18.

²² *Ibid.*

harmonic, and textural patterns help balance the ornamental freedom of the melodic writing.²³

Aside from the connection with the organic nature of the early Sonatas, the origins of the particular types of slow movement cannot be traced with any certainty since Sorabji's brand of highly polyphonic and melismatic figuration is evident in so many other contexts. However, as a general guide, we might suggest that the origin of the more obviously florid style of the nocturne is particularly manifest in "In the Hothouse", while the more soberly textured aria perhaps derives most clearly from the Interlude of the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue. The difference between these two main types of slow movement is most pronounced during the 1930s, and this is particularly evident in works that contain examples of both—for instance Symphonic Variations and the First Piano Symphony, although even corresponding instances from the later Piano Symphony No. 5 are revealing.

In later years there is a tendency for these different types of slow movement to merge into more of a single generic entity. One reason for this is the inevitable effect of the changes in texture caused by thickening single melodic lines into chordal formations. Another feature that distinguishes later examples of slow movements is the inclusion of brief instances of sudden explosive passagework—this by comparison with the exceptionally subdued dynamic levels demanded by the composer in the likes of Le Jardin Parfumé, Djami, and the adagio from Piano Quintet No. 2.

It is difficult to pinpoint differences between the slow movements that comprise single complete works and those that are but a small portion of a larger composition.

²³ See Michael Habermann's "style analysis" of Le Jardin Parfumé ("Sorabji's Piano Music", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 364–89).

One possible deviation may be found in the greater degree of segmentation in the autonomous compositions; greater variety being achieved by contrasting complex passages with sections in slower note values, perhaps with a stricter use of counterpoint (Gulistan, Djami, etc.). However, this is by no means consistently observed: the aria from Piano Symphony No. 2 is treated rather similarly to Gulistan in this respect. Furthermore, to confuse matters further, Sorabji's terminology is similarly fickle. This particular "aria" is actually a nocturne (according to the way this name is used in the other examples in his output), while Le Jardin Parfumé (another "nocturne") is described as a "poem".

The Prelude And Cadenza

The descriptive terminology of the shorter virtuoso forms is similarly variable. The most common name given by Sorabji is "*moto perpetuo*", but this is not always, strictly-speaking, accurate. However, despite the occasional short breaks in the flow of the figuration, what Sorabji is generally referring to is a series of running notes (almost always semiquavers), sometimes with chordal fillings in the case of later works, such as the last two Piano Symphonies. In a few other cases where the basic type of figuration is slightly different—small repetitive patterns of notes—he might entitle the movement "toccata". Obviously these are not to be confused with the larger complete works of the same name, but they fill essentially the same function and design as the standard "*moto-perpetuo*" and should therefore be considered under the same heading. Among the works containing movements of this description are Organ Symphony No. 2 and Piano Symphony No. 2.

The *cadenze* are generally, though not always (Symphony II), more varied in texture. In particular they make use of a wider range of textures, using fuller quasi-

chordal writing to build climaxes, often in conjunction with explicit pedal points (Piano Sonata No. 4). Sometimes chordal writing may appear for all or part of a movement (Cadenza II from Opus clavicembalisticum), or the movement may be broken down into sections based on different textures and figuration (Cadenza I from Opus clavicembalisticum). It may well be that the virtuoso movements of the late works represent a coming-together of the quicksilver passages from the preludes and the textural filling-out of the writing of the *cadenze*.

One of the fundamental elements and distinguishing features of Sorabji's *cadenze* is the pedal point. This might be explicit (Opus clavicembalisticum) or implicit (Part I of Symphony II). Sometimes these are surprisingly long-range in outlook, as in the tritonal relationship of the pedal points in Opus clavicembalisticum and Piano Sonata No. 4; in the latter piece this has particular significance due to the role of the tritone as one of the primary intervallic cells of the work as a whole.

Both the prelude and the *cadenza* illustrate the principle of balance between freedom of material and an underlying design. In the prelude the form is essentially free, with no real development of any kind²⁴—thematic fragments are merely stated while the continuous running notes may or may not also contain some kind of reference to thematic material—but the structure, or consistency, is provided by the very continuity of these semiquavers. Similarly, in the *cadenze* the quasi-improvisational freedom of the thematic fragments and accompanimental material is offset by a stable pedal note / chord lasting for most or all of the movement. This

²⁴ Except insofar as the notes may occasionally be arranged in cumulative beamed groupings, e.g. 2+3+4+5 etc., or the reverse.

principle of balance is reflected in the slow movements, where the improvisational elements are countered by the use of patterns and ostinato figures (see below).

Due to their virtuoso natures, and the fact that there is little in the way of formal development, these movements act either as introductions to larger movements (perhaps at the opening of the new part of a work), or as expanded link passages. The latter may occur between movements or sections in the same style or form (as in the case of Part I of Opus clavicembalisticum and Part II of Piano Symphony No. 4), or simply as part of a series of shorter movements (as in the Fifth and Sixth Piano Symphonies).

“Self-Organising” Forms

What is interesting about the “self-organising” forms is that they do not obviously follow Sorabji’s supposed preference for structure dictated solely by the musical essence. Rather, there is a clearly defined “external” (or pre-formed) structure—independent of the “internal” elements such as themes and figuration—that remains largely faithful to its basic principles throughout his career. Moreover, this external structure is sufficiently flexible to operate at different scales as required.

Fugues

The fugues are undoubtedly the best examples of a clearly worked-out formal system that provides a stable background for a more liberal treatment of the other musical elements—in this case harmonic freedom in particular. All of Sorabji’s fugues, with the exception of the early immature example in the Prelude, Interlude and Fugue, employ the same basic structure:²⁵

²⁵ See also Simon Abrahams, “Use and Development of Fugal Form by

1. Exposition.
2. Main Section: subdivided into smaller sections treating each of the variant forms of the subject—*inversus*, *cancrizans*, *cancrizans inversus*—in turn.²⁶
3. Stretto.
4. Final Section: introducing augmentation and chordal expansion of the subjects. In a multi-subject fugue the final section of the final subject is generally called “Coda-Stretta” and adds all the previous subjects to the texture; a series of virtuoso gestures generally precede the final chords of the movement.

The simplest method for expanding the scale of the fugue using this formal plan is to add another subject. This also avoids the immediate problem of tedium by introducing a new and contrasting theme (with a set of corresponding rhythms and textures). In the long term the potential for tedium remains as the same basic style is being prolonged—there needs to be a sense that the movement and all its subjects are actually leading somewhere. This sense of progression is best achieved when the subjects gradually increase in speed through relative shortening of note-values (as in Piano Symphony No. 1) or when each subsequent subject introduces an additional voice (e.g., *Sequentia cyclica*; Piano Symphony No. 2; Transcendental Study No. 100; Piano Symphony No. 6). Also to conquer the potential problem of stylistic tedium, some of the longer fugues from later works (from Piano Symphony No. 2 onwards)

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji in his Keyboard Works between 1920 and 1930”, Mmus. dissertation, University of Southampton, 1995.

²⁶ Organ Symphony No. 1, containing the earliest recognisable example of the standard Sorabji fugue uses only the *inversus* form of the subject. Its contemporary work, *Variations and Fugue on “Dies Irae”* is the first in which all four forms are systematically employed.

ploy one or more interludes between parts (subjects).²⁷ For example, the vast fugue concludes the already lengthy multiplex fourth movement of Piano Symphony 2 has a brief *cadenza*-like interlude between its fourth and fifth (and final) subjects. This opens with a reference to the initial fanfare of the movement and rises in turn material from each of the sections that follow. The effect is one of taking off development to draw breath before concluding with the final subject and Coda-Stretta that combines all the previous fugue subjects in a remarkably complex contrapuntal and polyrhythmic web.

Several features tend to differentiate fugues from different points in Sorabji's career. The earlier fugues, for instance, are generally longer as there is a more extensive (and rigidly patterned) working out of the various subjects. Whereas later examples move directly onto the *canonizans* form of the subject (or the *inversus*, as becomes the norm circa. 1940 onwards) after the initial exposition, some earlier attempts instead begin a separate "exposition" of the subject in its *recto* form. Clearly, this creates a relative lengthening of the basic form by at least four times the duration of the subject. The lengths of the subjects themselves are also generally more extended than those from the 1950s onwards.

This more expansive treatment of thematic material in the earlier examples is further reflected in the handling of countersubjects and other subsidiary material. The intersubjects play a more prominent role—there might be as many as three or four accompanying a single subject—and they are even occasionally subjected to the same manipulations (*inversus*, *canonizans*, etc.) as the subjects themselves. These may

²⁷ This may also be the reasoning behind the appearance of an interlude in the finale of the Gloria (a massive passacaglia) of the Messa Alta Sinfonica.

occur simultaneously with the development of the main subjects, or they may appear separately within episodes devoted exclusively to the countersubjects.

The appearance of such episodes, and similar events such as the “subsidiary” stretto, is more common within the more expansive nature of the earlier fugues. Later in his career, Sorabji refines and streamlines his treatment of the form, removing many such passages that do not directly contribute to the development of the primary thematic material.

One interesting and major change in the nature of the fugues that appears in Sequentia cyclica and Piano Symphony No. 2 is the systematic introduction of polyrhythms into the subjects. Up to this point it is noticeable that Sorabji’s fugue subjects, though otherwise inventive and diverse in character, are remarkably conservative rhythmically compared to the rest of his writing. The inevitable result of this addition is a quantum leap in the degree of contrapuntal and rhythmic complexity of the fugal writing. This is visible up to a point within those sections dealing exclusively with individual subjects, but becomes readily apparent in the Final Section (the “Coda-Stretta”) that combines them (fig. 32). Naturally, such complexity places extreme demands on both performer and listener—it is perhaps writing that is more satisfying to the reader or analyst. Moreover, the combination of subjects in different polyrhythms also results in a sudden shift in rhythmic style and complexity within the fugue itself, creating a curious mix of rigid intellectualism and a texture more akin to the quasi-improvisational freedom of the slow movements. Again, this may be disturbing within the context of a performance of this otherwise carefully regulated form, and the fugal writing is less successful as a result. Perhaps it is for this reason that such extreme use of tuplets in fugue subjects was relatively short lived,

being used most obviously in Piano Symphony No. 2 and *Sequentia cyclica*. In the majority of the later works—from Piano Symphony No. 3 onwards—subjects from the same fugue are less obviously characterised with unrelated tuplets.

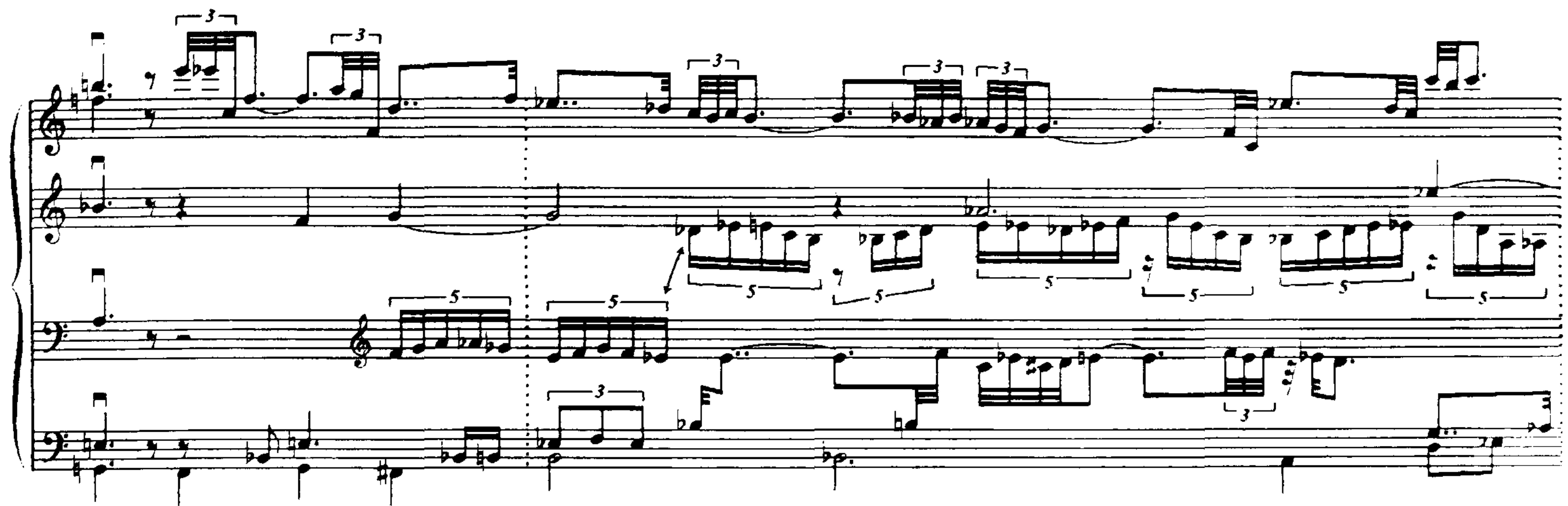


Fig. 32. Polyrhythmic combination of five fugue subjects in Piano Symphony No. 2

Variation Sets

Sorabji's variation sets generally take the form of either a passacaglia or theme-and-variations; however, it is also not unknown to find the former being described as an "ostinato", especially in later works. Although many of the individual variations in these sets are grouped together to explore a similar type of figuration or texture, as a whole Sorabji's variations do not follow a seamless progression towards a definite goal. Instead, they are a means of exploring different ideas of counterpoint and ornamentation, with the overall number of variations in the set usually being pre-determined according to his favoured numerology (squared numbers—such as 49, 64, 81—being common).²⁸

²⁸ See Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 63–66, for a discussion of the significance of numerology in Sorabji's work.

The relationship between form and scale in Sorabji's variation sets—particularly the more common passacaglia—is very similar to that in his fugues: both can easily be adapted to work at a wide range of scales without significantly altering the basic form. In the variation sets the scale of the movement can easily be influenced by the number of variations used (just as the number of subjects affects the duration of the fugues). However, taken on its own, this is not necessarily the determining factor: the theme and 24 variations from Toccata No. 4 is rather small, while those sets from Organ Symphony No. 2 and Symphony II are massive, relatively speaking. However, there is an additional way of governing length and duration that affects primarily the passacaglia. This is by choosing carefully the length of the theme itself. Because in a passacaglia the theme is treated as an ostinato each variation is exactly the same length in terms of note-value.

The passacaglia form as a whole provides the best example of the use of patterns of texture and figuration: many of the individual variations are devoted to a particular pattern. The result is rather like some of the studies by composers such as Chopin or Alkan, but the purpose here is solely compositional, rather than to exercise the fingers with a particular technical device. As is often the case, this use of patterns is a way of unifying the texture, providing a balance for the harmonic and ornamental freedom. It is interesting that the first piece to employ the passacaglia (as opposed to the inherently more free and improvisational theme-and-variations) should be Organ Symphony No. 1, which Sorabji regarded as his first mature work. Both the passacaglia and the second movement fugue (which provides similar direction and control over line and texture) thus introduce a new element of organisation into his music and so mark a change in compositional direction—or a recognition of the need

to ameliorate the exuberant freedom of the early Piano Sonatas with some kind of logic and control. This organisational element was especially important given his apparent desire to expand the scale of his compositions further.²⁹

The actual passacaglia themes tend to vary greatly in character, from lyrical melodies to a bland series of notes, all the same length. However, even the most unpromising themes apparently serve a purpose as their nondescript character, like a blank sheet of paper, often provides greater potential for outlining new ideas.

The passacaglia invariably draws to a close with a violent conflagration of chords, but, as with the Piano Symphonies, it is not uncommon for a more peaceful epilogue to provide the final word. Those from Opus clavicembalisticum and Symphonic Variations are typical.

The themes-and-variations are, by contrast, rather more free-form. Again, they can appear at any scale from the very brief (the first movement of Toccata No. 4) to the colossal (Symphonic Variations), but, while there is the same desire to explore every conceivable type of figuration and ornamental writing, it is not uncommon for some variations to bear only the most tenuous of connections to the original theme. In this respect there is a similarity in attitude and approach with that of Reger and Szymanowski.

However, no matter what the differences between these two main types of variation set, the common element is the principle of “self-organisation”: the original theme itself provides a background of unity above which Sorabji can introduce as much free ornamentation as he wishes. The passacaglia is generally more contrapuntal

²⁹ As expressed in his “Analytical Note” for the Fourth Piano Sonata, for example (see appendix).

in nature; this is perhaps inevitable as the constant statements of the theme lend themselves to various linear combinations.

It is not unknown for Sorabji to bring different aspects of this type of form together to create a larger whole. Part II of Piano Symphony No. 4 is a classic example in this respect, and also serves to illustrate how patterns of different and similar forms may be balanced, as well as how the principle of formal regression (by using “nested” structures) evident in some fugal and variation forms may appear on an altogether larger scale. The music itself proceeds in a more or less continuous flow, but is at the same time arranged in sections with titles such as *Preludio corale*, *Interludio*, *Variazioni*, and so on. Perhaps the best way to view this arrangement is as a large-scale exercise in variation form, and this becomes more apparent when the design is reduced to its components:

Variation Set	“Preludio corale”
Interlude	“Perpetuum mobile”
Variation Set	“Ostinato” [passacaglia]
Interlude	[perpetuum mobile]
Variation Set	“Variazioni” [theme and 49 variations]

In short, it is another illustration of the way Sorabji can use a particular formal idea to expand the scale of his writing, while balancing elements of continuity and variety.

Local Organisation: Rhythm, Texture, Harmony, And Figuration

As a counterbalance to the quasi-improvisational style that is to be found in varying degrees in many of the forms outlined above, Sorabji employs a number of features and gestures on a smaller scale to maintain coherence. These features might be harmonic, textural, rhythmic, or thematic, but they all have the same basic purpose: to provide an unobtrusive feeling of large-scale continuity while operating themselves on a relatively local level.

Rhythmic Patterns And Ostinato

From around the mid-1920s onwards, as part of his attempts to organise his compositions more efficiently, phrases are often given stability by the repetition of a small accompanimental rhythmic “cell” against the more flexible nature of the melody. This kind of unit generally lasts approximately the duration of a single phrase. The repetition generates an underlying metrical pattern, while the harmony may either outline a pedal harmony, or ascend or descend chromatically towards the end of the phrase. In a way these cells act rather like the stable left-hand parts that support the so-called “Chopin rubato”—perhaps also acting as a more flexible replacement for the rhythmic strait-jacket of the time-signature. Sometimes the interest is enhanced by using repetition to set up a recognisable pattern before systematically deviating from it (fig. 33).



Fig. 33. Use of patterns of figuration in Un nido di scatole, page 4

Significantly, figures such as these most frequently appear in slow movements or sections, where they serve to provide a localised feeling of unity and stability that contrasts with the otherwise free ornamental writing; this textural anchor is particularly noticeable when compared with those passages that are purely rhapsodic (fig. 16). Similar figuration may also to be found in slower passages of the “symphonic tapestries”—also “evolutionary” in their basic formal approach.

Sometimes it acquires a significance in its own right: the first movement of Piano Symphony No. 2, for instance, makes particular use of this idea, devoting a complete theme to an ostinato idea (fig. 34).

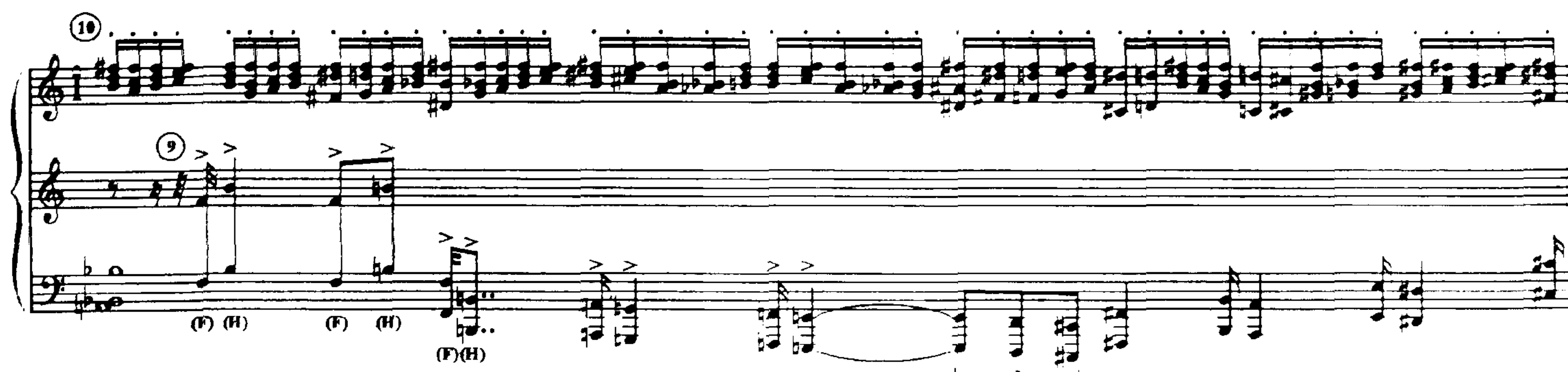


Fig. 34. Thematic use of ostinato in Piano Symphony No. 2, pages 1–2

Indeed, figures such as these must be considered a kind of ostinato, despite their frequent use for outlining chromatic lines and progressions. The ostinato, in one form or another, is a device that recurs frequently in Sorabji's writing. In its most primitive form, as in the "*punta-d'organo*" sections of *Symphony II* and the "*Coda-epilogo*" from Piano Symphony No. 5, this can be no more than a repeated single note or chord. As the description "organ-point" suggests, the purpose here is more harmonic than rhythmic. The similarity in such cases with Ravel's "*Le Gibet*" is clear and has already been noted elsewhere,³⁰ but the rhythmic cells employed by Sorabji are often more complex.

There is a dual contrast implicit in the use of these ostinato figures. On the one hand, the use of a repeated note or chord creates a sense of harmonic stasis within the texture that contrasts with and moderates the highly "dissonant" harmonies it generally underpins; at the same time, the lack of movement created by this stasis is

³⁰ Habermann, "Sorabji's Piano Music", in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 360.

offset by the motion (albeit repeated) of the rhythmic cell itself. It would seem that the integration within the texture of such essentially contrasting elements is one of the characteristic features of Sorabji's music.

The ostinato, like other aspects of Sorabji's mature writing, can also be found operating at different scales. It may act as the foundation for an entire movement (Piano Symphony No. 2, fourth movement, "*Punta d'Organo constanziata*"; Toccata No. 4, third movement) or it may form the basis for a complete variation or study (variation no. 50 from Symphonic Variations; Transcendental Study No. 74). On the other hand, it may be simply a localised phenomenon. Sometimes these different roles may coexist within the same piece: during the course of Piano Symphony No. 4, and especially Piano Symphony No. 2, ostinato figures make brief appearances on a number of occasions. In addition, both of these works also have full-scale ostinato movements.

One favourite ostinato gesture to be found in a number of slow movements and pieces is a lazy alternation between two chords, acting as an accompaniment to one or more melodic lines (fig. 35).

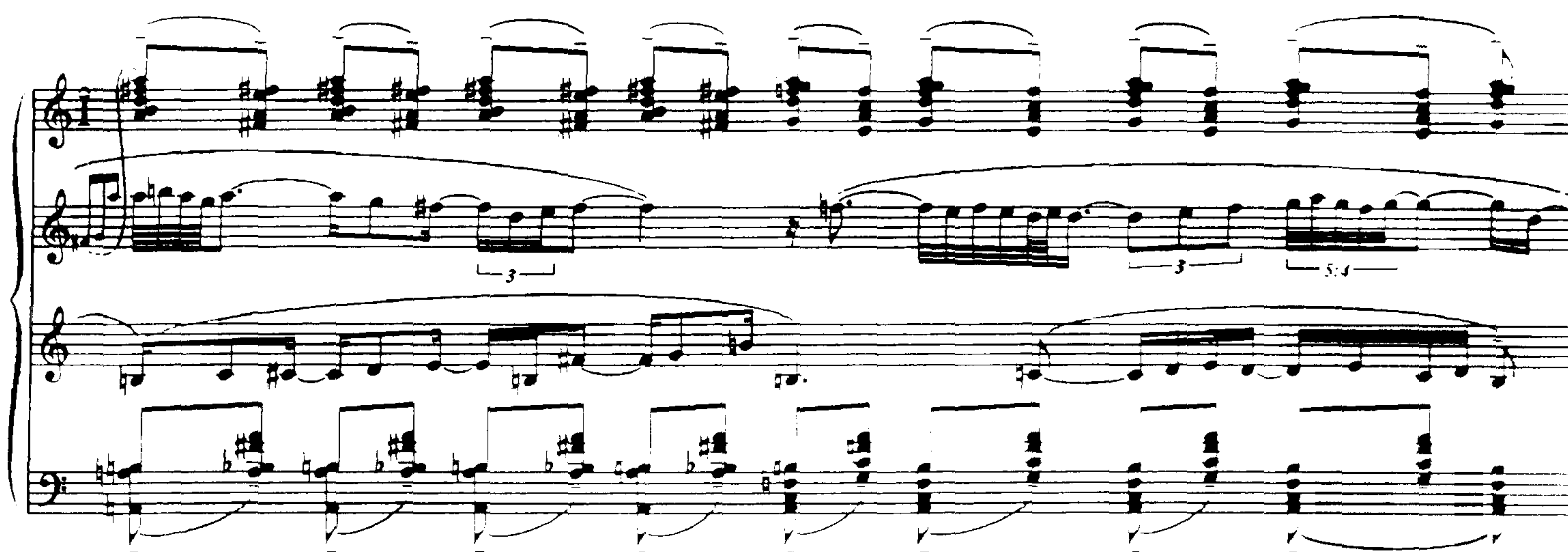


Fig. 35. Use of ostinato figures as accompaniment in Gulistan, page 6

This kind of writing is particularly to be found in works written from 1930-1950, but the generalised nature of this gesture means that elements can be found in many works before and after this period.

Melodic Design And Figuration

A number of melodic patterns can also be found throughout Sorabji's output. Some of these are clearly based on implied voice-leading (multi-linear writing); others suggest a rather stylised approach to melodic writing reminiscent of some folk melodies. Chief among the latter are the rapid arabesques based around a longer repeated note (fig. 36).



Fig. 36. Opening melodic phrase from Gulistan

The purpose of this type of writing, as identified by Habermann, is to provide a harmonic stability to counter the disruptive effects of the ornamental figures and a-metrical freedom.³¹ However, the rather stylised nature of this kind of formation may be seen from similar examples by other composers (fig. 37).

³¹ Ibid., 369.



Fig. 37. Arabesques around a pedal note in the first movement of Khachaturian's Violin Concerto in D minor

Other, less florid, themes and melodies also employ "pedal" notes, and while these do not display the same stylised profiles as the examples above, they follow the same principle of preserving a fixed note or harmony while another implied "voice" descends in steps or half-steps (fig. 38).



Fig. 38. Thematic design in the Second and Third Piano Symphonies

Sometimes, these longer tones may themselves gradually rise or fall, outlining scalar formations or arpeggios (fig. 39).



Fig. 39. Melodic design in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 125

A connection can easily be made between these types of melody and the ornamental manipulation of themes to be found in the variation sets: variation 53 of the passacaglia from Opus clavicembalisticum and variation 34 from Symphonic Variations are particularly good examples. Once again, it will be noted that these highly chromatic melodies are “earthed” by stable pedal notes: rhythmically uneventful 5th B–F# in both these cases. This in turn provides an insight into Sorabji’s elaboration of texture in general and explains how he develops such complex and polyrhythmic fabrics from relatively simple underlying harmonic and melodic gestures, although the lazy harmonic rhythm found in the examples given above makes them naturally more a feature of the slow movements and sections (see also page 136 of Piano Symphony No. 4).

Another related type of melodic design to be found in a number of works is similarly revealing of Sorabji’s delight in exploring different contrapuntal avenues through the design of a single melodic line. Here, the main body of the melody proceeds in one direction, while an offshoot tries to break free in the other direction so

that the stable “pedal” melodies discussed above are replaced by compound melodies employing contrary motion or symmetry (fig. 40).

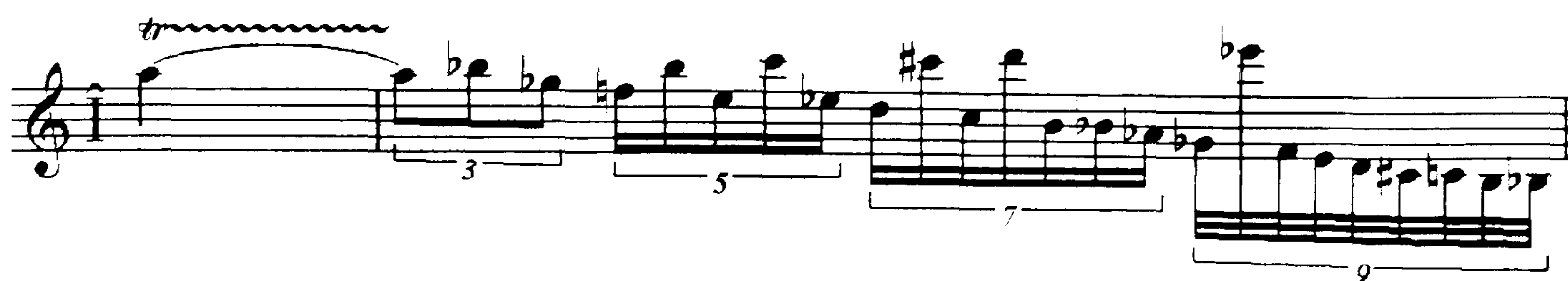


Fig. 40. Contrary motion in a multi-linear melody in *Le Jardin Parfumé*, page 15

Such formations are extreme examples of Sorabji’s use of multi-linear implications to stabilise his quasi-improvisational melodic writing, but they amply illustrate his emphasis on contrapuntal thinking, even within the confines of a single part.

Accompanying figuration often displays a similar multi-linearity that suggests underlying melodic gestures or harmonic progressions (fig. 41).

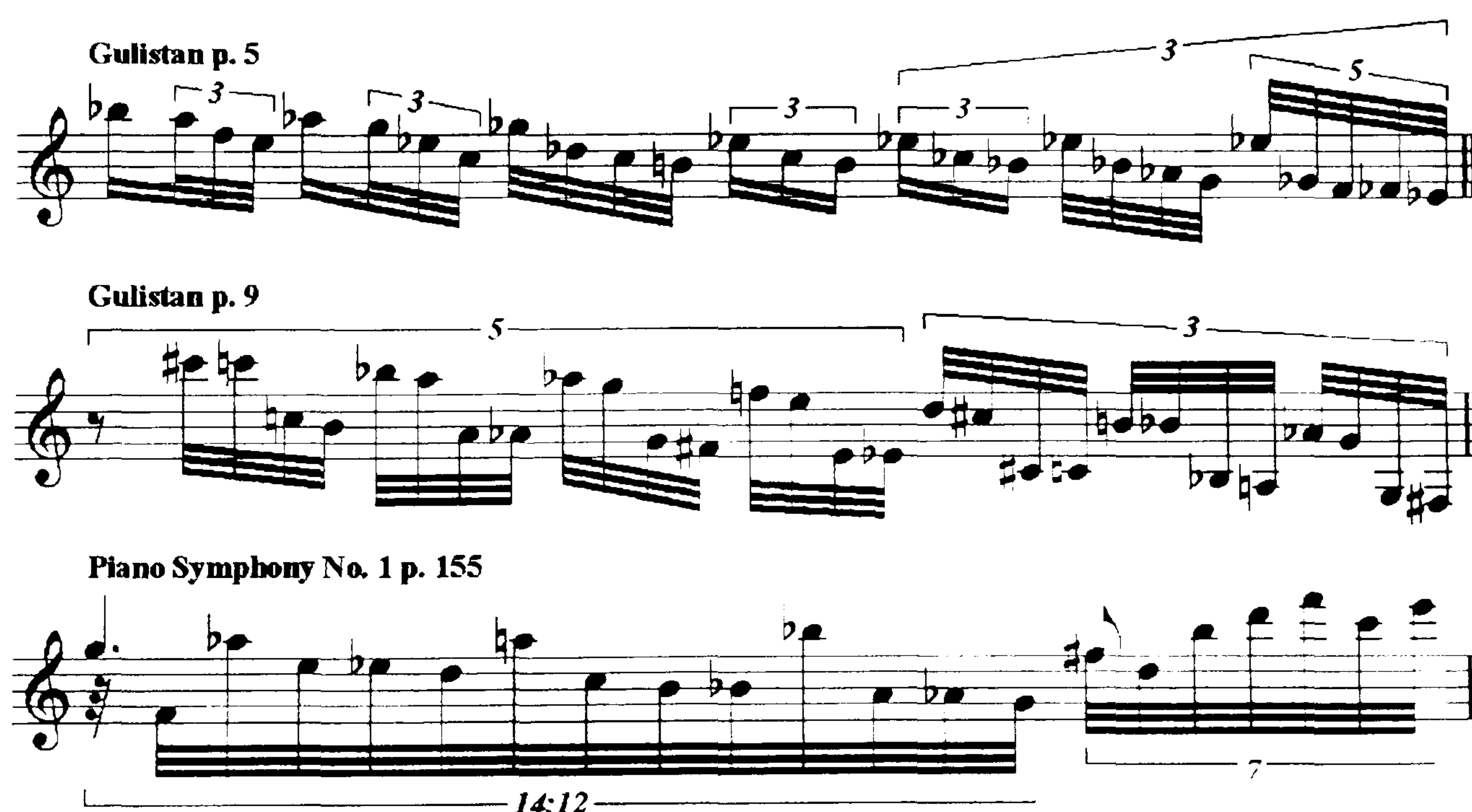


Fig. 41. Multi-linear patterns used as figuration

Harmonic Patterns

Related to the melodic use of symmetry, or “wedge” patterns, are the symmetrical harmonic formations, of which not a few can be found in Sorabji’s mature works (for example, the ending of Transcendental Study No. 92). Often symmetrical chord progressions form part of an accompanimental pattern within one voice; on other occasions, two lines may themselves be stated in symmetry (fig. 42).



Fig. 42. Harmonic symmetry as figuration in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 96

Alternatively they may form an integral harmonic progression (fig. 43).

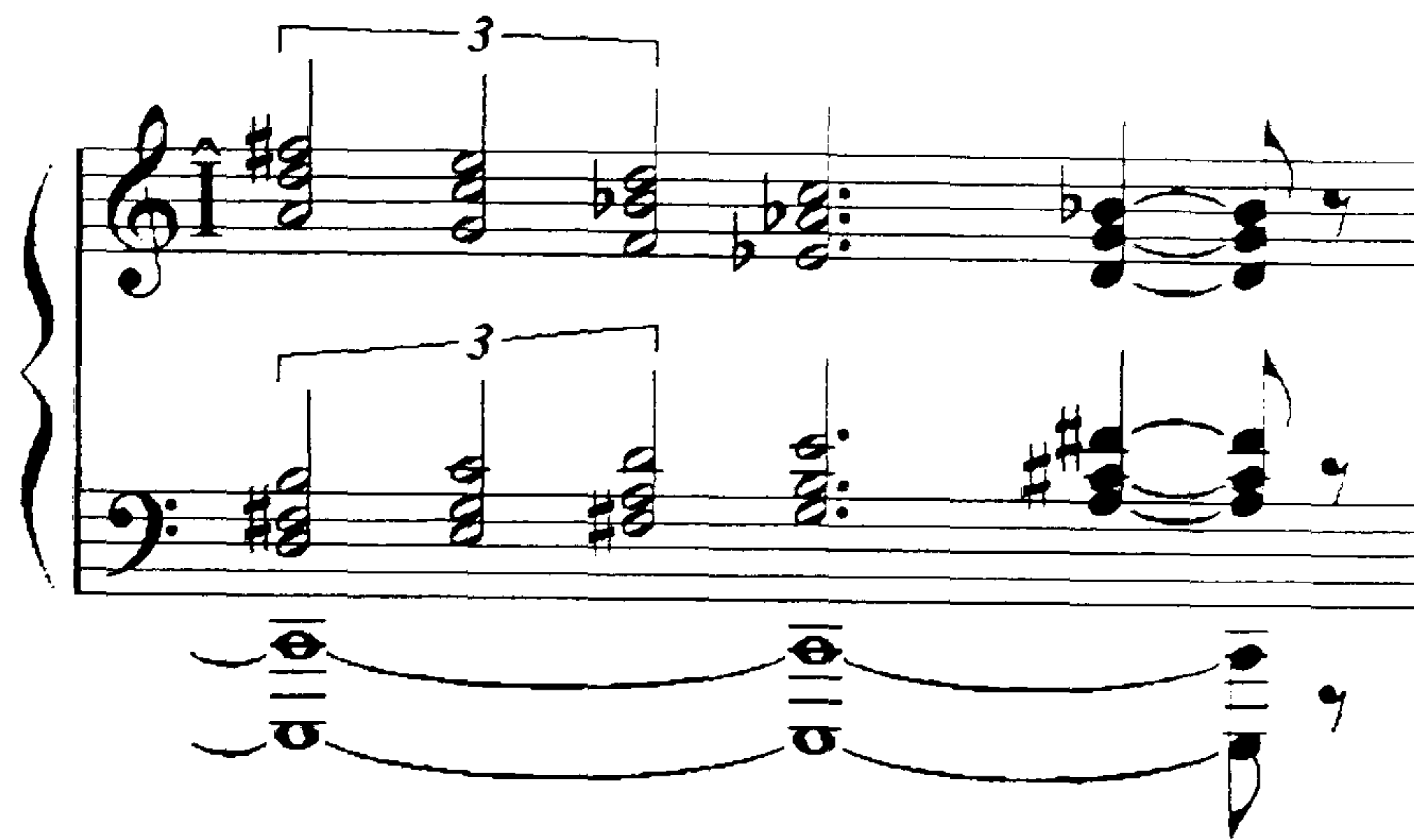


Fig. 43. Symmetry in harmonic progressions in Piano Symphony No. 1, page 66

Clearly the latter example in particular reveals a connection with the Busoni of Sonatina seconda and Doktor Faust in its sublimation of traditional harmonic consonance to the symmetrical “logic” of whole triads. This prioritisation of contrapuntal logic over harmonic considerations is to be found throughout Sorabji’s output. In the later works the generation of such passages in a contrapuntal setting also illustrates the way in which his melodic writing is increasing thickened into chords, which themselves defy conventional notions of “functional” harmony by moving in parallel blocks (fig. 44).



Fig. 44. Treatment of chordal “melodies” in Piano Symphony No. 6, page 58

The principle of parallelism, familiar in the works of a number of composers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, also has a place in Sorabji's compositional arsenal. It is frequently to be found in the accompanimental figuration of the slower movements, especially the nocturnes, and fig. 44 is perhaps best thought of as a vertical thickening of individual "voices". Other examples of parallelism, resulting from strict contrapuntal combinations, inevitably tend to be restricted to the fugues. Voices may appear in parallel motion at any interval—even 2^{nds}, 7^{ths}, or tritones—and this is partly responsible for the more astringent sound that often characterises these movements. Naturally, he takes care that the counterpoint is not compromised by allowing parallel movement of this kind to persist too long.

Inevitably, the use of harmonic patterns such as parallelism or symmetry is ultimately disruptive of conventional tonality. Traditional concepts of consonance and dissonance were therefore sacrificed in exchange for textural organisation. Other features that inevitably disrupt tonal functions include the various uni-intervallic structures: whole-tone and chromatic scales, along with tritones and diminished 7^{ths}. These latter are generally used more sparingly than other patterns in order to prevent the often strong characteristic sonorities of each from dominating the texture and creating a sense of sonic inconsistency.

Among the other formations familiar from early twentieth century music the pentatonic formations generally take the form of "black-note" glissandi, and as such are easily restricted in their duration and importance within the texture. It is also common for them to be combined with the modality of corresponding glissandi on the white keys, creating the characteristic black-note / white-note "bi-tonality" sometimes used by other composers (e.g., Debussy, Szymanowski).

Other modal formations may be similarly employed: their less pungent colouristic properties allow them to be more freely used as accompanimental material as well (fig. 45). However, even if and when such modal scales are used, their character is completely dissipated by the underlying harmony (which is generally not consistent with the intervallic formation or transposition of the mode—fig. 45 being a typical instance of semitonal opposition), as well as the fact that they are rarely sustained for long enough to create any kind of characteristic sonority or referentiality. On other occasions the mode may be further diluted by the use of passing-notes.

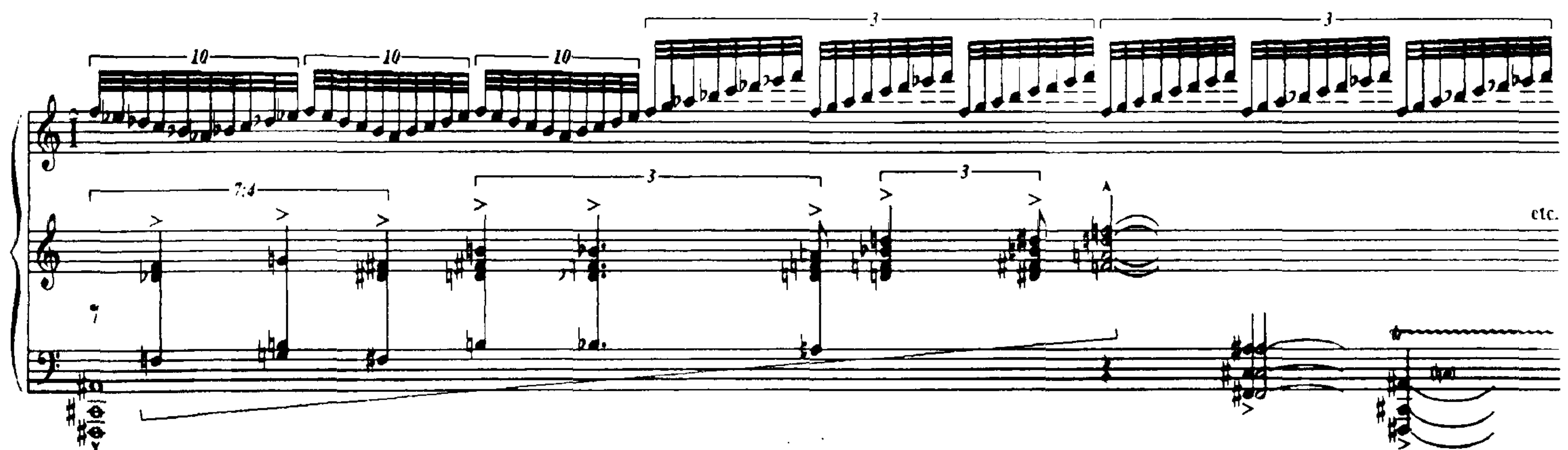


Fig. 45. Modal figurations in Piano Symphony No. 2, page 202

Dissonance Control And General Procedures For Organisation

Although these various types of pattern enable Sorabji to exercise control over texture while retaining flexibility, he obviously felt that some kind of additional dissonance control was appropriate. This is partly to counteract the tonally disruptive effects of many of these gestures, and, perhaps more importantly, to generate a stable underlying organisational base to counter the potential for chaos inherent in the use of

so many different types and qualities of pattern. Although Sorabji's dissonance control is therefore intended for use at the local level, the types of control that he employs also appear to be influenced by larger concerns. For instance, the ways in which the harmony is treated in a fugue or nocturne are clearly different, and this is largely as a result of the very different textures that characterise them. This in turn is governed by the nature of the form: the fugue is restricted by the strict controls on the number of parts that are active at any one time, while the nocturnes are by their nature saturated by different kinds of ornamentation and polyrhythm, which, among other things, almost completely disrupt any sense of harmonic rhythm or momentum.

One of the biggest potential problems therefore, especially in the larger works, is how to reconcile the difference in harmonic style between the lush harmony of the slow movements (especially pronounced in the "middle-period" works of the 1930s–50s), and the more astringent and linearly orientated writing exemplified by the fugues. Sorabji clearly felt that a meeting point had to be found between the dissolution of conventional tonal harmony through the prioritisation of contrapuntal elements over vertical concerns, and the similar loss of tonal identity resulting from the extension and combination of the higher tertial dissonances. The problem of consistency is perhaps at its most critical in the fugal expositions, where the harmony of the entire fugue has to be presaged in the enforced spartan nature of the texture in the first few entries—it is not easy to imply the use of 9^{ths} or 11^{ths} in strict 2- or 3-part writing. This is partly tackled by creating themes that are tonally ambivalent or rely on underlying chromatic motion or patterns, rather than traditional cadential implications. With the addition of a second voice in the form of the answer Sorabji's strategy is clarified. This consists of what appears to be a note-against-note approach

to consonance and dissonance that is strongly reminiscent of species counterpoint in that particular emphasis is given to the intervals 3rd, 5th, and 6th. One of the best examples of this type of writing may be seen in the fugues from Symphonic Variations, which, due to the triadic nature of the main thematic cell of the piece (E-C-A), clearly illustrates the creation and use of a series of tonal consonances and dissonances divorced from the traditional context of “functional” (i.e., based on notions of harmonic rhythm and cadential progression) harmony. In contrast to the fugues of Reger, there is no sense of restless modulation because while the theme itself may or may not suggest a tonal centre or ultimate resting place, its harmonic accompaniment never allows this to be firmly established. This is consistent with the writing in the main body of the fugue, since although the addition of extra voices (usually four or five) allows for the potential creation of identifiable triads and extended harmony, the freedom with which Sorabji combines the already tonally-ambiguous subjects, countersubjects, and other material would make this inappropriate. Thus he avoids what is the most serious problem with Reger’s fugal writing: the uneasy co-habitation of Wagnerian chromaticism and Bachian form and counterpoint. As Wilfred Mellers puts it, “Reger was attempting to put new wine into old bottles,” and “if the composer today is to create a music convincingly contrapuntal in the same sense as Bach’s music, it can only be within a tonal scheme as relevant to our world as Bach’s was to his.”³²

A similar method is at work in the brief virtuoso preludes and interludes: again the “non-functional” nature of the dissonance control helps prevent the texture

³² Alec Harman and Wilfred Mellers, Man and his Music (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1977), 998.

becoming clogged by the harmony, but still balances the essentially free form of these movements. Instead, we have a kind of disembodied sound that is more texture, or even colour, than harmony, but still retains an internal organisation. Even in some hybrid movements we can still see this system in operation. The opening section of the third movement of Piano Symphony No. 2 fulfils the role of the virtuoso *moto-perpetuo*-type movement, but at the same time is a passacaglia-ostinato of sixteen variations. Due to the nature of the texture (unbroken quavers) he employs the same method of note-by-note consonance and dissonance; but the design of the “theme” (such as it is) also enables him to suggest harmonic areas on B and F—together already introduced as one of the primary cells of the works (spelling the initials of the original dedicatee, Frank Holliday—see below), and also important as a tritone.

For much of the time in the slow works and movements, particularly the nocturnes, his melodic gestures ornament a local harmonic area created by thick chords in longer note-values. However, in cases where more than one melodic line is at work these melodies may all be consonant with the prevailing harmonic area without necessarily fitting in with each other. In other words, the combination of these melodies sometimes gives the impression of quasi-bitonality within a larger complementary tonal area. Taking this idea further, in some cases this basic textural idea may be expanded so that there are two sets of two melodies, each set being directly consonant with its own members but not with those of the other set. It is easy to see how this idea developed into the more chordally-based textures of the later works. This is clearly demonstrated in those passages where Sorabji starts a phrase by notating two parts as separate lines and ends it by writing them as chords—or vice versa.

Another one of the distinguishing features of Sorabji's harmony is the treatment of semitonal opposition as a consonance. For instance, the final chord of a piece might (as in Opus clavicembalisticum) superimpose harmonies based on G and G \sharp ; another common treatment employs such harmonies above a pedal ostinato. By establishing this type of harmony as part of his language he allows an extra flexibility in his melodic writing. As we have seen, the use of patterns governs much of the structural formation of these melodies, providing them with an autonomy from the underlying harmony. The resulting effects are quasi-bitonal, but more often—again, as previous demonstrated—there is a disembodied quality to the overall sound that is reminiscent of Busoni's writing in his more "advanced" style of the Sonatina seconda and parts of Doktor Faust (although the basic Sorabji sound world is generally much warmer and thicker).

As with Busoni, dissonant harmonies such as these may go hand-in-hand with "pure" triadic writing within the same piece, and so another important reason why Sorabji's harmony needs some kind of stable dissonance control is to enable an acceptable mean to be found between these apparent extremes, and for this mean to be used as the fundamental harmonic style; unregulated leaps between different harmonic styles are one problem of the immature Third Piano Sonata, for example. Following Busoni's example (as well as some other composers), an important way of bridging this gap is to treat the harmony, no matter how dissonant, in ways that are very much a part of common-practice "functional" writing. For instance, dissonances "resolve" onto other dissonances by means of stepwise or semitonal movement of the chord elements. Often, highly dissonant or complex textures are supported by a bass

that rises or falls in steps or half-steps, particularly when leading up to a climax or other structurally important cadence.

Some passages may also be built up using fragments of scales—fragments that are not always conventionally related to one another. The origin of this may perhaps be considered the tradition of increasing the harmonic interest of a passage by substituting an alternate mode (i.e., major instead of minor and vice versa) using the 3rd or 6th scale degree.

(i) Busoni: *Elegy No. 2*

p leggieriss. e a tempo

2 Pedali tenuti

(ii) Sorabji: *Piano Symphony No. 2, 4th movement*

Fig. 46. Use of harmonic mixtures

In the case of Busoni this kind of harmonic effect is one of the main characteristics of his harmonic language: it helps to break down any sense of “major” or “minor”, leaving something more seemingly unstable in its place (fig. 46i). Sorabji turns this idea on its head, instead using the 3rd as a bridge between whole triads a semitone apart: in fig. 46ii he superimposes the triads of G major and G \flat minor, with

the common note B: acting as the bridge. When—as here—the figuration is arranged so that the semitonally opposed notes are not stated simultaneously the resulting chordal mixture creates a similar sensation of harmonic instability as the Busoni example, but through different means. On the other hand it is easy to see how, if such harmonies are combined as a single chord, the formations that are frequently used as structural units or cadences may be “justified” (fig. 47).

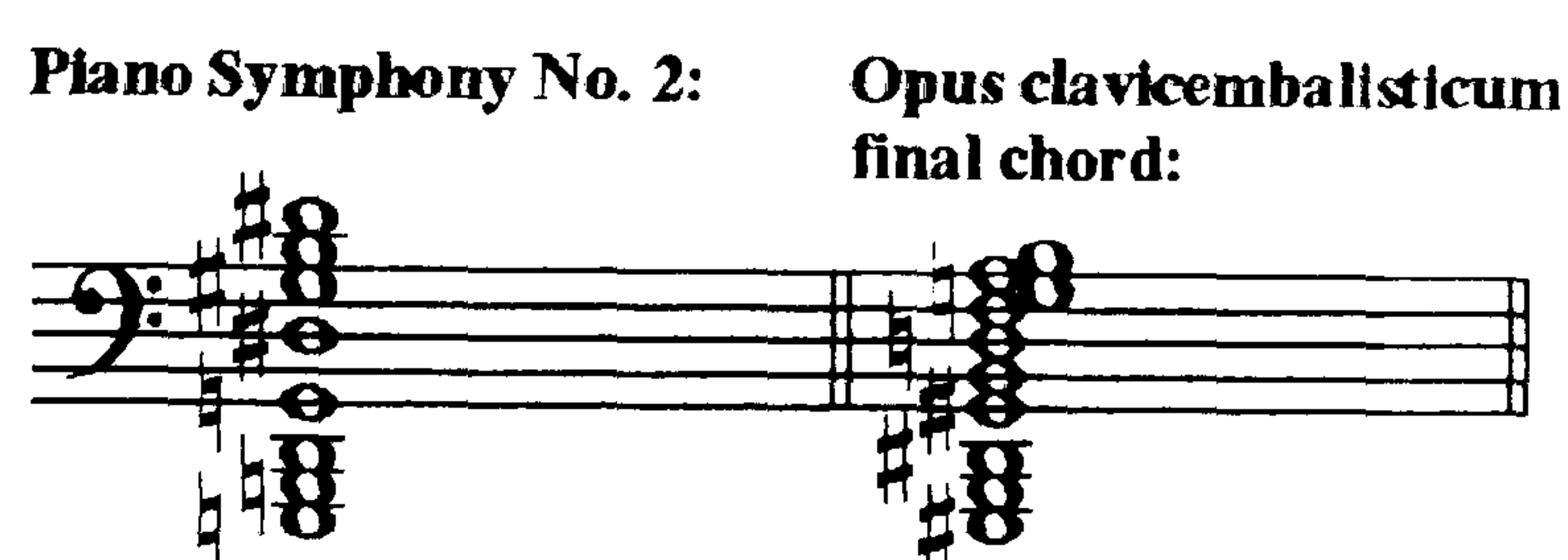


Fig. 47. “Structural” chords

This kind of writing may also be found to have connections with the work of Busoni. His *Klavierübung*, for instance, provides exercises in which different scales are played simultaneously, one in each hand. This is an idea that Sorabji adopts with gusto in his *Concerto per suonare da me solo*. Due to its satirical nature—parodying the uneasy relationship between the piano and the orchestra—this piece contains figuration that is more conventional than that in any other of his works, with plenty of sweeping scales and arpeggios. This makes it particularly easy to see how he utilises such juxtapositions and patterns in his writing (fig. 48). However, rather than preserve any one intervallic relationship between parts he frequently presents new combinations. This has the advantage of preventing the figuration from descending

into obvious bi-tonality: no single bi-tonal relationship is allowed to tarry long enough to become established.

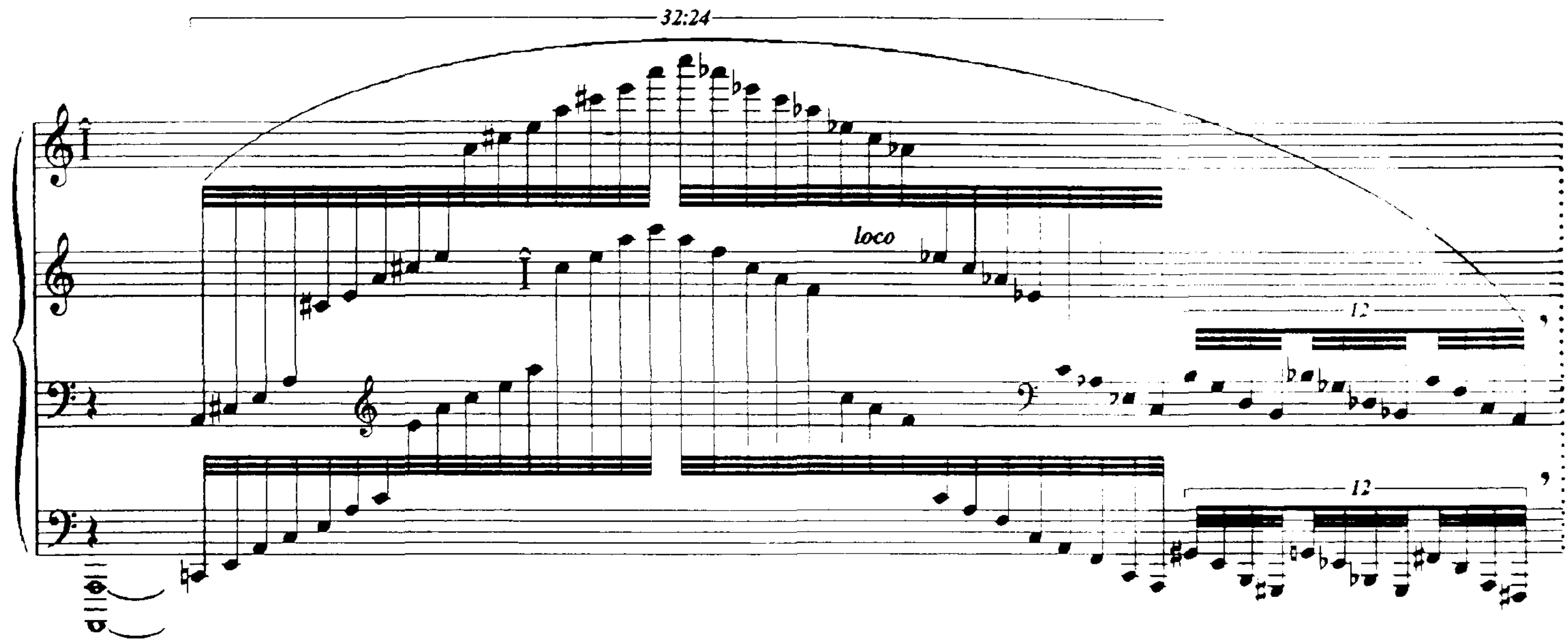


Fig. 48. Juxtaposition of arpeggios in *Concerto per suonare da me solo*, page 17

Nevertheless, such cases are examples of vertical combinations of scales or arpeggios, related to some of the “dissonant” harmonic types he employs. Also present in his writing are instances of *horizontal* combinations, and these are more clearly related to his use of patterns to create figuration. This brings us back to the idea of using scale fragments. Often in extended scalic passages Sorabji will build the figuration using fragments of “real” scales to generate a new “meta-scale”. More often than not the identity of the scale fragments will be determined by patterns (such as movement by 3rd or the circle of 5ths). Obviously, this helps retain some kind of order and sense of progression in passages that are not overtly grounded in stable harmonic formations. The new artificial scales generated by these horizontal progressions may occur on their own, or they may be doubled in parallel (fig. 49), or even symmetry (fig. 50), by another “meta-scale”.

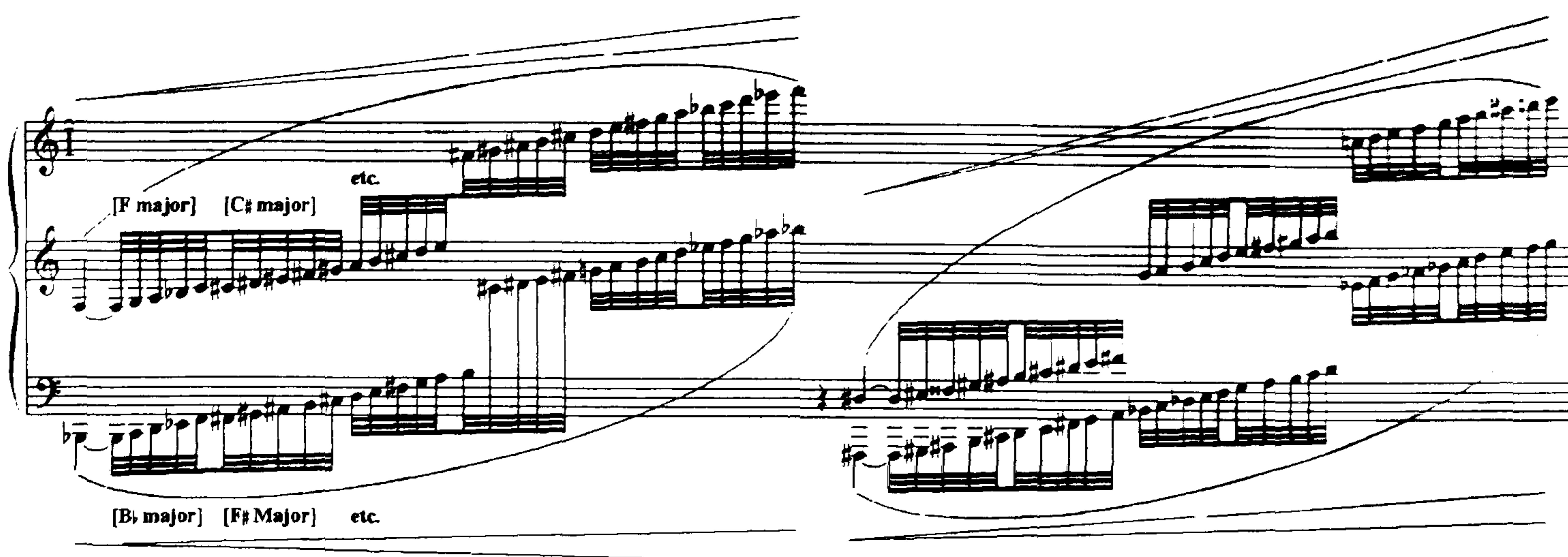


Fig. 49. “Meta-scalic” passages in Concerto per suonare da me solo, page 15

Fig. 50. Arpeggio fragments presented in symmetry in Concerto per suonare da me solo, page 64

As may be seen from these examples, intervallic and transpositional patterns play a strong role in this type of figuration, much as they do with the other types of

ornamental filigree. Similarly, these kinds of patterns often serve as an accompaniment, providing harmonic colouration. In many cases these types of writing suggest connections with other aspects of Sorabji's style. In fig. 51 the doubling of the top line to create interlocking diminished 7^{ths} leads inevitably to chordal movement by minor 3rd: a favourite progression of Sorabji's (fig. 56).

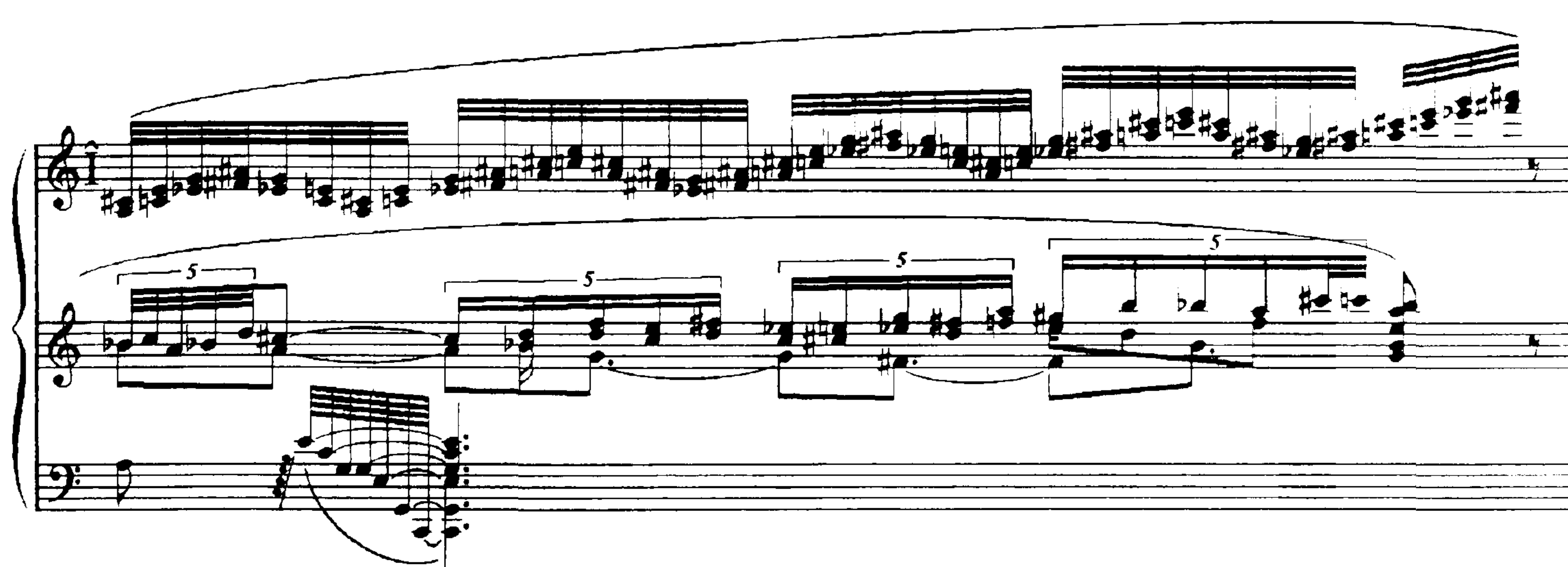


Fig. 51. Interlocking diminished 7^{ths} in Symphonic Variations, page 127

Tritones

The tritone is undoubtedly the single most important interval to be found in Sorabji's output, and it fulfils a variety of roles, including harmonic colour, and the generation and regulation of the texture. Although the distinctive sound of the tritone is generally subsumed by the complex harmonies prevailing in Sorabji's scores, occasionally he singles it out for a more particular purpose within the texture. More often than not, its usage recalls its traditionally sinister connotations as "*diabolus in musica*". For instance, one of its most frequent incarnations is as a tolling passage

(fig. 52) that has been described as “what sounds suspiciously like the diabolically mistuned bells of a church clock striking thirteen!”³³.

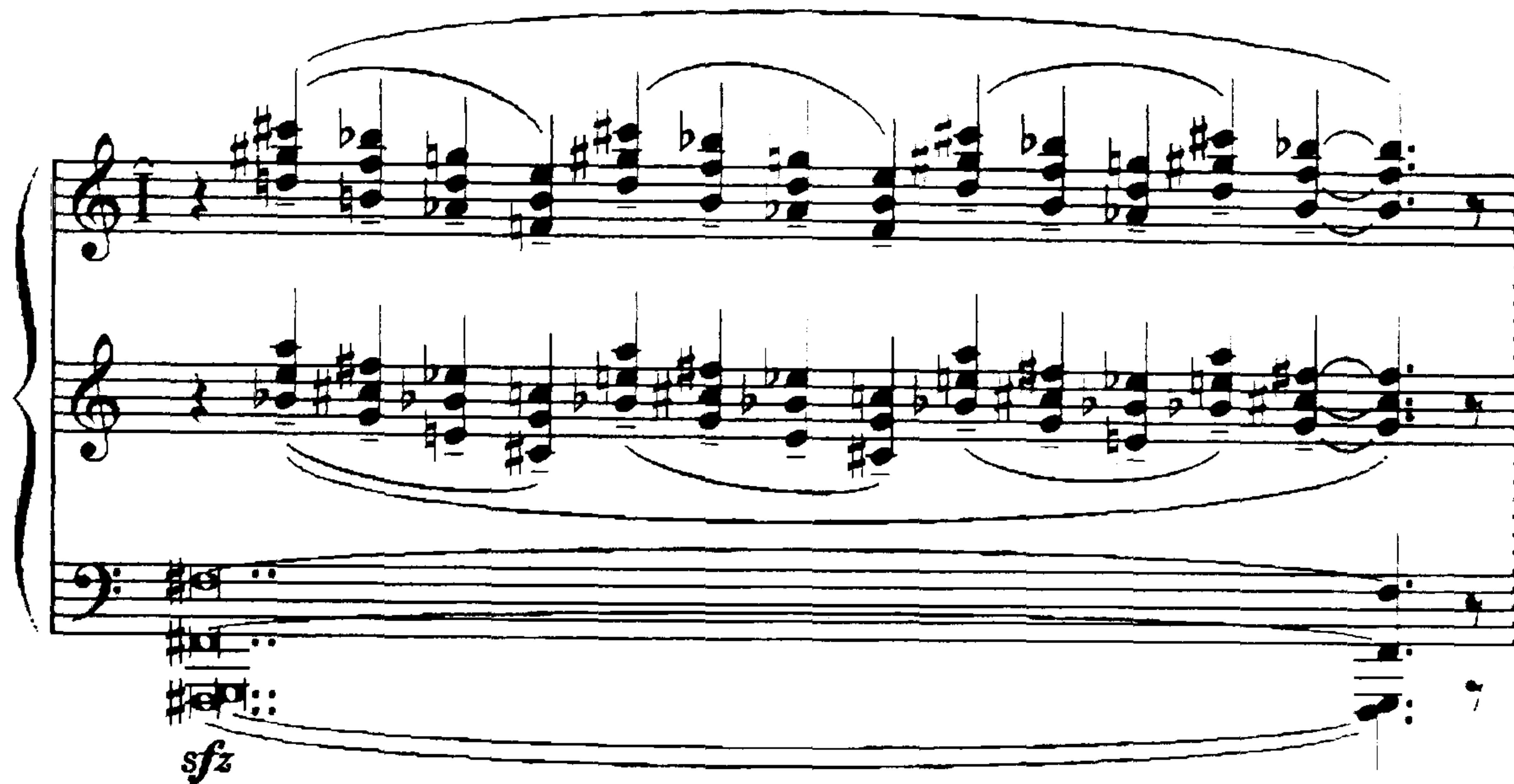


Fig. 52. Tritones in “*Quaere inter secretiora materiae*”, page 1

While this admirably reflects the gothic horror of the short stories of M. R. James, this particular figuration appears in a virtually identical form in other works, including *Un nido di scatole* and Toccata No. 4.

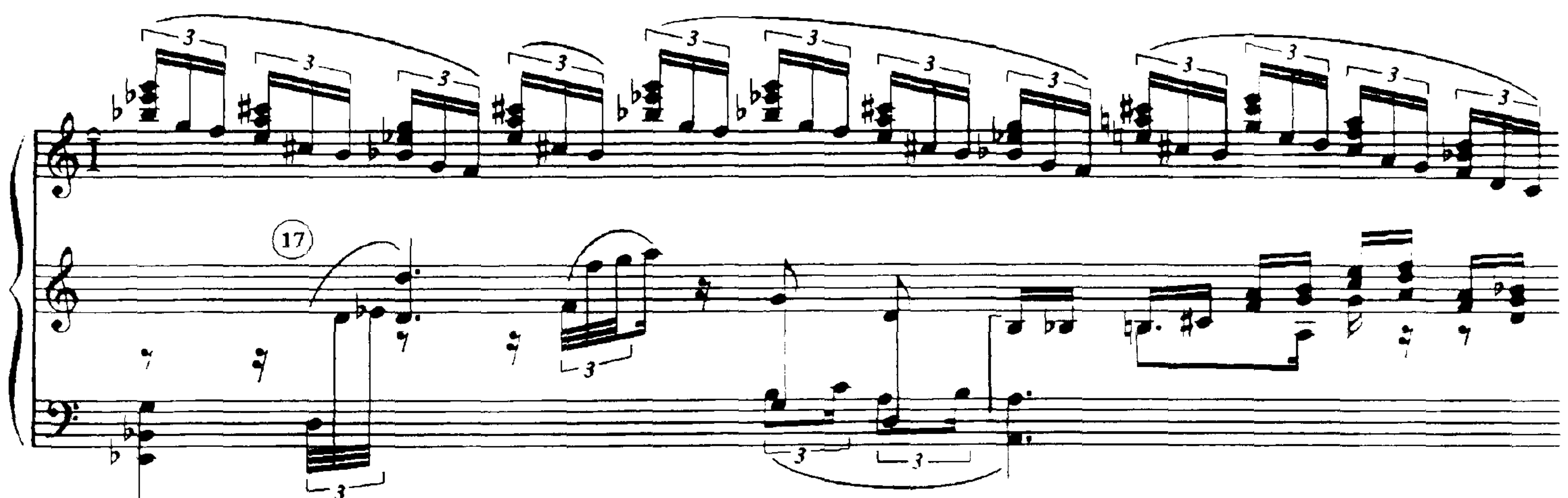


Fig. 53. Tritonal progressions in Piano Symphony No. 3, page 31

³³ Polkinhorn, liner notes for *Sorabji—The Piano Works*.

On other occasions the infiltration of the texture by the tritone may be less overt, even when present in the underlying progressions, the figuration, or both (fig. 53). Alternatively, it may also be used to create quasi-bitonal effects, though once again this usage is rarely prolonged (fig. 54).



Fig. 54. Combination of parts at the tritone in Gulistan, page 6

Sometimes the articulation of the tritonal interval is remarkably long-range. The third movement of Piano Sonata No. 4 could perhaps be thought of as a prelude and fugue on a vast scale: the “prelude” is an arch-like structure Preludio–Fantasia–Cadenza, of which the Prelude and Cadenza are both virtuoso sections over a pedal note. What is interesting is that the pedals of these opening and closing sections outline a gigantic tritonal cadence: the Prelude being based on E_b, while the Cadenza is grounded on, and ends unequivocally in, A. It is improbable that this is mere coincidence as the following fugue makes prominent use of the tritone, and indeed the thematic essence of the entire work is clearly founded on it.

A similar relationship is to be found in the two Cadenza movements of Opus clavicembalisticum (which are structurally balanced—each being tactically positioned between a variation set and a fugue). Again the pedal notes used outline a tritone, and again the notes concerned are E \flat and A respectively. The tritone plays a less obvious role in Opus clavicembalisticum—the “motto” or “dominant theme” emphasises the perfect 4th instead—but it is interesting to note the extent to which his writing was continually inspired by it. Another example may be found in another work from roughly the same period: Piano Quintet No. 2. Here the *cadenza* for string quartet on pages 425–27 is supported by a sustained tritone pedal on the piano.

First movement: **Adagio**

Third movement:

Fifth movement:

Fig. 55. Tritonal cadences in Piano Symphony No. 2

The tritone also plays a part in the progression of harmonies at a more fundamental level. On numerous occasions root progressions move by the interval of the tritone, and often it even acts as a substitute dominant, replacing the V-I cadence. Piano Symphony No. 2 is particularly steeped in this interval as it serves an important thematic function as well; in addition to various instances throughout the course of the piece, movements 1, 3, and 5 all end with tritonal cadences, ranging from the simple to the ornate (fig. 55). As for its presence in other harmonic procedures, it is worth noting that it occurs—doubled—in one of Sorabji’s already-mentioned typical progressions: movement by minor 3rd (fig. 56).

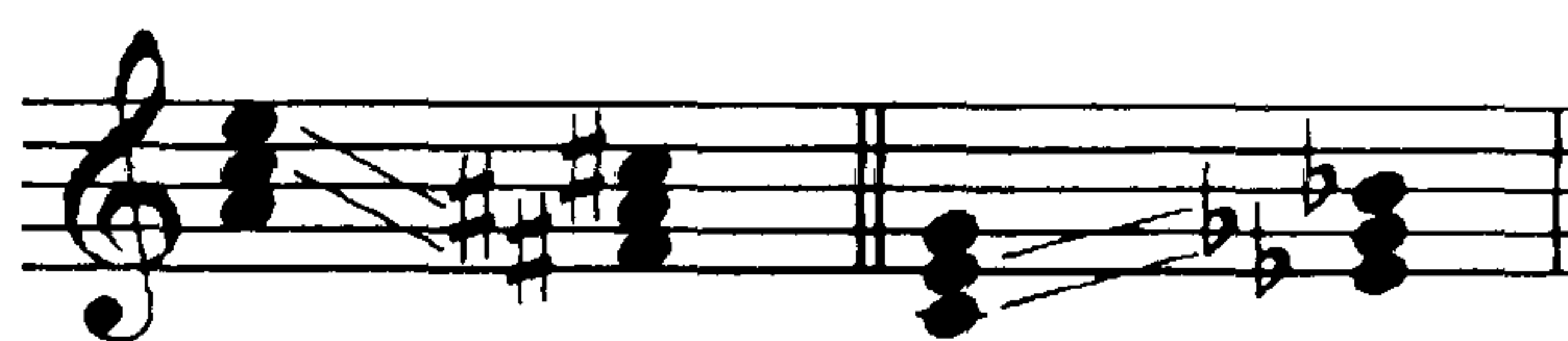


Fig. 56. Progression by minor 3rd, containing potential tritones

The pervasive influence of the tritone is most clearly expressed in the larger works, where its role is “explained” by its presence within certain other phenomena of harmony (and figuration), such as the diminished 7th and the whole-tone scale. While these are all disruptive of traditional tonality, the patterned nature of their uni-intervallic structures creates its own sense of order to replace it, even though individual occurrences of each kind are often highly localised. Similarly exploited for its tritonal properties is the 7/3 unit; this also clearly provides a harmonic bridge between the tritone and the whole-tone scale: something that has made it attractive to other composers.

Some larger pieces further demonstrate the versatility of Sorabji's use of the tritone by employing it as an intervallic cell within the thematic development of the work (Piano Symphony No. 2 and Piano Sonata No. 4 are obvious examples). This in turn gives an added significance to its simultaneous unfolding in the accompanying harmonies and figuration, even if its characteristic sonority is often obscured by the ornamental luxuriance of the writing.

Quartal Harmony

Overt and extended appearances of quartal harmony tend to be rare (one example being Transcendental Study No. 83), but the interval of the 4th nevertheless has a role to play in the figuration and thematic construction of Sorabji's output, thanks, not least, to the pre-eminent position of the tritone in the intervallic hierarchy. The use and sound of the 4th is more apparent in the early works—which Sorabji admitted were more derivative—and may be part of the lingering influence of Skryabin in particular, a composer initially admired by him but later viewed more critically.

As with the tritone, the perfect 4th may be used to generate figuration and, in turn, the themes (Opus clavicembalisticum) and harmony (Piano Sonata No. 4) that characterise a work. It is also not uncommon, especially in the works of the 1920s, to find it engendering ornamental gestures (fig. 57). However, although the early works reveal him intermittently investigating its possibilities (perhaps again inspired by Skryabin), quartal harmony never achieves comparable status to triadic formations in Sorabji's music. In his mature compositions it instead continues increasingly unobtrusively, only occasionally surfacing into brief passages of unsullied block chords (Piano Symphony No. 2, page 177) or figuration (page 172).

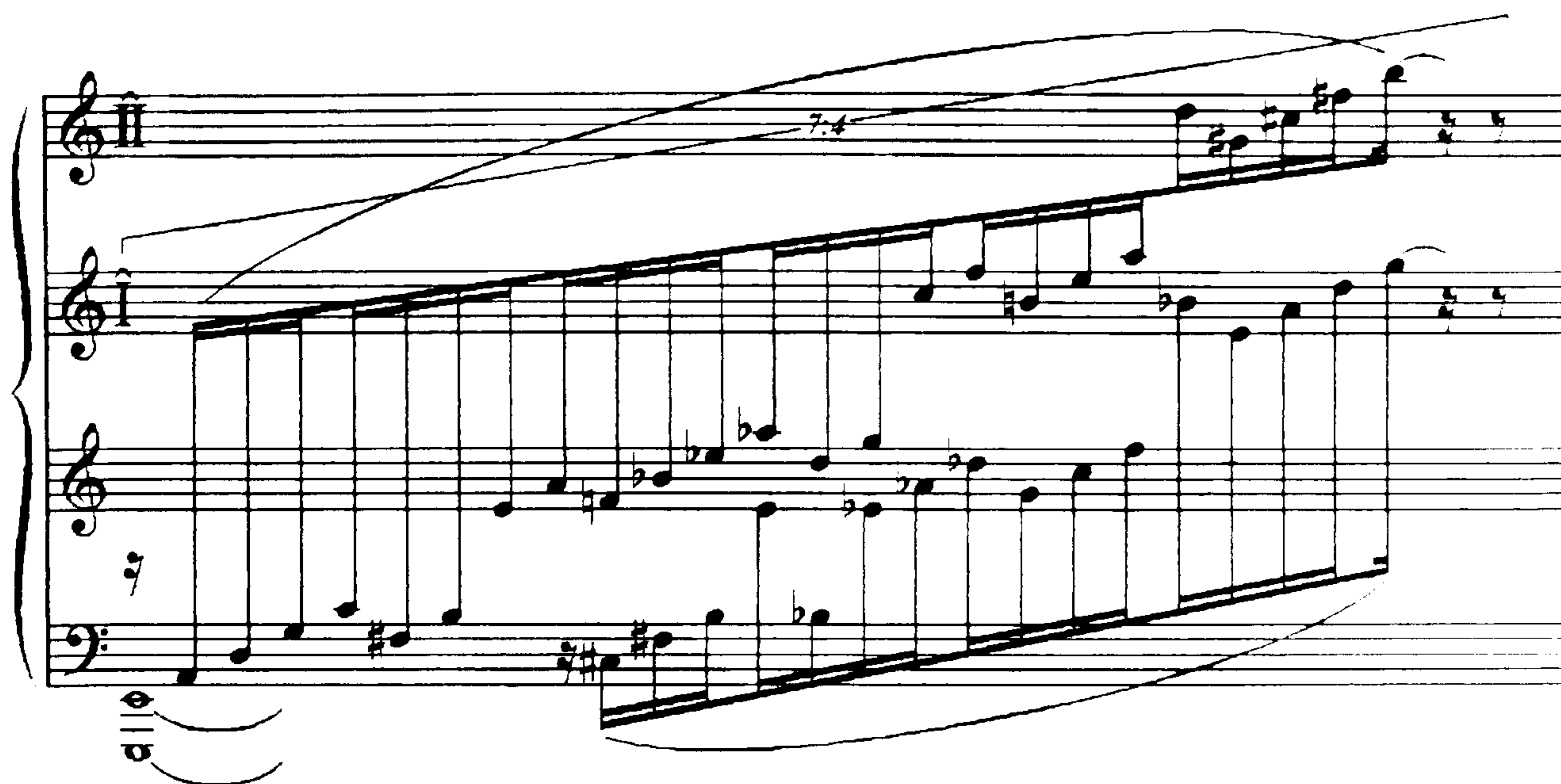


Fig. 57. Use of 4th in Djami, page 28

Thematic Usage

One important point mentioned in the “Analytical Note” of Piano Sonata No. 4 is the use of a “Dominant Theme” (or “motto”, as he calls it in his “Shortform-Analysis of Opus Clavicembalisticum”). This kind of governing motive seems to have been introduced in Sorabji’s works around 1927–28: it is also present in the “radix motive” that forms the primary material of Piano Concerto No. 8—although it may also be seen at work in a rudimentary form in the thematic cells that open Prelude, Interlude and Fugue and Piano Sonata No. 1. As its name would suggest, the “dominant theme” recurs in some or all of the other movements, although it may not necessarily govern the thematic development of a later movement—it is sometimes used as little more than a passing reference or allusion.

In later works, and especially in the Piano and Organ Symphonies, the number of themes used within the composition (and concentrated in particular in the first movement), gradually increases, reaching a peak with the first movement of Piano

Symphony No. 2, which contains no fewer than sixty-four themes. There is some decrease in thematic intensity subsequently (the exposition of Piano Symphony No. 3 introduces fifty-four, while the Fourth Symphony has no more than twenty-seven), so perhaps he felt that such thematic saturation was ultimately divisive. This may of course be why he felt that a single “dominant theme” or “motto” would be desirable, although it should be remembered that at the time that this idea was introduced the problem of thematic excess was not so apparent (the first movement “tapestry” of Piano Sonata No. 4 has only seven themes).

Whether a “dominant theme” is utilised, or whether there is a less frenetic thematic proliferation (as in shorter works such as “Quaere” and St. Bertrand de Comminges), it is usual for the main thematic material to be stated immediately at the outset of the work. This assists in the perception of thematic development, since in some works (such as Symphony II) many themes are so innocuous as to be hard to distinguish from accompanimental material on their first appearance. In such cases, only repeated study of the score makes these thematic elements more familiar, but the positioning of the main, or most important, theme at the beginning immediately attunes the ear and the eye to it.

Another way in which Sorabji achieves more effective thematic organisation is by occasionally using themes to generate accompanimental figuration. This may suggest a superficial affinity with the idea of “total thematicism” advocated by certain other composers, but Sorabji professed to being repelled by such a notion, considering it to be contrived (there are echoes here of his comments concerning the textbook application of form). Sometimes such quasi-thematic figuration appears in passages that are already dedicated to summing up the thematic argument to that point—as in

the interlude that occurs between the fourth and fifth parts of the fugue in Piano Symphony No. 2 (pages 201–203 in the manuscript). At other points this usage predominates within the texture in order to propel the flow of the music, as the introduction on page 69 of the same work of successive types of figuration based on the first five themes of the first movement demonstrates.

As is the case with the fugal subjects, Sorabji often uses themes that are either themselves harmonically complex or ambiguous, or that are harmonically undermined by their accompaniment (fig. 58). This enables them, especially when they have very distinctive contours, to appear effectively in a potentially large number of different contexts and harmonisations.



Fig. 58. “Dominant theme” of Piano Symphony No. 2

Another aspect of thematic usage that particularly distinguishes Sorabji’s music is his tendency to use the names or initials of his dedicatees to generate themes. Among the works to be used in this way are Piano Sonata No. 5, Fantasiettina, Symphonic Variations, Symphony II, Piano Symphony No. 2, Piano Symphony No. 4, Piano Symphony No. 5, and Piano Symphony No. 6. In most cases these form only small cells, usually intervallic in nature, such as the tritone F-H (Frank Holliday) from Piano Symphony No. 2 or triad E-C-A (Edward Clarke Ashworth) from Symphonic Variations, but these nevertheless often play a major role in the thematic

organisation and / or the harmony. Sometimes the dedicatee's theme is relegated to a relatively minor role, as in Piano Symphony No. 4, in which Harold Rutland's theme is to be found in the design of the second fugue subject; Hugh MacDiarmid's theme in Opus clavicembalisticum is similarly understated. In addition to being used to generate material, it is perhaps best to regard this use of the dedicatees' names as a means of personalising what was essentially an expression of Sorabji's friendship; in a way these musical themes are somewhat akin to a monogrammed handkerchief, or other such personal gift.

Like a number of other composers, Sorabji is also fond of quoting material from his other works. Clearly there is a relationship between direct quotations and the use of a favourite thematic contour or idea for figuration (the theme of Un nido di scatole is rather similar to the "dominant theme" of Piano Sonata No. 4); however, in some cases the reference to a previous work is more direct. The best example of this kind can be found in Piano Symphony No. 5, the Epilogue of which opens with a number of bars that are an exact quotation from the opening of the second part of Symphony II. This may be because Sorabji was dissatisfied with the earlier work, or it may be because he never completed it in the form that was originally intended (as his second orchestral symphony). Whatever the reason, there is certainly a clear relationship between the two works, to the extent that he later added a reference from Piano Symphony No. 5, which was dedicated to Alistair Hinton and based on the motive AH, to the final bar of Symphony II (these bars are otherwise identical). Piano Symphony No. 5 also quotes from other works as well: the opening of the Interlude from Part II quotes from both Piano Sonata No. 4 and Piano Symphony No. 1.

Other Features Of Interest

In addition to the main features of harmony, texture, and figuration that define Sorabji's compositional identity there are other less important characteristic features. Perhaps the most notable of these is the nature of his piano figuration. There is often a very clear use of hand-positions to inspire figuration. This is not unknown in the work of other composers: Nicholas Cook has discussed similar aspects of Skryabin's writing.³⁴

While some of his harmonic preferences might conceivably be related to hand-position—the C# and G# chords that are ubiquitous in his writing lie very comfortably under the hand—some of the figuration he employs demonstrates clearly its origins as a means of moving quickly through different registers of the keyboard (fig. 59).



Fig. 59. Figuration inspired by hand positions in Opus clavicembalisticum

Significantly, such treatment has a compositional concomitant, insofar as the movement of the hand is here dictated by linear connections and patterns of voice-

³⁴ Cook, 202.

leading. It is in fact another example of the way in which Sorabji uses classical conventions of voice-leading and progression to control his rather less-than-conventional idiom.

Conclusion

What can be seen from these techniques and strategies is that Sorabji had clear objectives in mind when he was composing: namely finding ways to organise his writing while indulging his interests in rich textures and colours, florid ornamentation, and counterpoint. His reverence for composers such as Mahler and Berlioz betrays his preference for the grand gesture, while his obvious connections with the likes of Debussy, Busoni, and Szymanowski hint at a confluence of various musical traditions. Significantly, all these composers were masters of orchestration, revealing an ear for detail and tonal refinement that Sorabji undoubtedly appreciated. Indeed, in his solo piano and organ works he consistently demonstrates an awareness of the subtleties of dissonance and resonance that rivals anything that Chopin or Debussy might have produced.

We can see from the developments of his early works through the 1920s that Sorabji was tackling compositional problems faced by so many composers of the time, such as how to develop a relevant and individual style while the tonal foundations that had supported Western classical music for so long were being increasingly disregarded. He himself believed that tonality still had an important role to play in twentieth-century music—this much is evident from the many occasions in his concert reviews on which he bemoans the trend towards atonality (as well as his disgust at finding it creeping into his own music—see below). However, he was apparently very much against the idea of tonality as a musical straitjacket, hence his

reverence for the works of composers such as Mahler, and Busoni, who employed a fundamentally tonal idiom, but often compromised it in favour of counterpoint and ornamentation, or otherwise presented familiar chords in unfamiliar contexts. This explains the originally more active role he took in musical society, namely his position in his youth at the forefront of the musical avant-garde—this including the above composers, but also the likes of van Dieren, Skryabin, and early Schoenberg.³⁵

I am rather surprised at your apparent attitude towards the ultra-modern movement in painting. Surely you cannot expect this art to escape the general upheaval! Surely it is most undesirable that it should! Moreover what do you suppose that all the modern painters are aiming at? All of them: Expressionists: Fauvistes: Orféistes: Post-Impressionists; Cubists; Futurists? Why just what Sch[ö]nberg and all the others are fighting for in music, greater freedom and power of expression.³⁶

As new tonal and non-tonal languages were investigated in the early decades of the twentieth century the problem arose of sustaining a musical argument over an extended span without the support of traditional tonal relationships. Many composers therefore found it more convenient to work to a smaller scale, at least until they had found alternative means of extending structure. There was also a reaction against what was seen as the hyperbole of the Romantic style. One of the more interesting aspects of Sorabji's compositional output is therefore the wide range of scale that is exhibited. So far our attention has been drawn to this mostly in the context of his alleged

³⁵ These (at the time) progressive attitudes may be seen in his correspondence with Philip Heseltine. However, his position as a serious, forward-looking composer may also be inferred from his presence in the canon of Erik Chisholm's Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music—which boasted performances of works by Berg, Schoenberg, Szymanowski, and van Dieren during its lifetime. Sorabji's later decision not to perform his music or allow it to be performed here or elsewhere seems symbolic of his being overtaken by compositional trends.

³⁶ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Philip Heseltine, February [?] 1914, quoted in Derus, "Sorabji's Letters to Heseltine", in *Sorabji*, ed. Paul Rapoport, 209.

eccentricity: the supposed “myths” of enormously complex and unplayable works of megalomaniac proportions. What has been overlooked is what this implies regarding the relationship between scale and compositional languages. For all the criticism that has been levelled at Sorabji concerning his use of vast musical canvasses, he was one of the few composers of the time to be able to develop a unique personal style *and* employ it freely at any scale he chose.

Sorabji deals with the potential problem of writing extended works without relying primarily on common-practice harmony in these ways:

1. By using quasi-improvisational forms (such as the slow movements or the preludes and the *moto-perpetuo*), in which the whole question of length and structure is largely irrelevant since the texture is maintained and organised by momentum, unity of figuration and patterns, etc. In other words, there is little in the way of obvious formal structure or development—these are essentially static “forms”—and the texture is self-maintaining. This was apparently his objective from the early days of his career when he was experimenting with the idea of “self-coherent” music not reliant on themes.
2. By employing “self-organising” forms (the fugue and the passacaglia) that have a predetermined structure that is largely independent of the nature of the musical material itself. In these movements or works the pattern lies in the form, rather than in the melody, harmony, or texture, and as such can be easily replicated at different scales.

This last feature—that the nature of the form sometimes appears to be independent of the music itself—is apparently at odds with the remarks (quoted in full above) that Sorabji made concerning his ideas on form:

This is the crux of the distinction between organic and inorganic form: in the one case the music is forced or poured into a ready-made mould . . . , a form that does not really arise out of any inner necessity of the music, in the other it moulds its own form.³⁷

So, despite what he liked to maintain concerning the way (good) music should be composed, he himself used a combination of organic (slow movements, preludes, etc.) and inorganic (fugues, variations) form. On the other hand, his methods would appear to be consistent with the statement he made in 1953 concerning his manner of composition (see chapter 2): namely, that the general structure of a piece was planned some time before the actual “musical stuff” was added.

This use of compositional design with various types of pattern and regression may go some way to explaining the remarkable speed at which Sorabji apparently composed. It is certainly easier to relate to a composer who is able to work at speed because he has a number of pre-planned designs and strategies that can be easily adapted to the musical material at hand than it is to one who relies upon arcane mental or spiritual techniques that may or may not have some relevance to the music itself.

Thus, the use of clearly designed formal structures—the best example being his standard fugal design—would naturally be an aid to speed. Once the essential musical element had been decided upon (the subjects, countersubjects, etc.) it would surely have been relatively easy to integrate these with the pre-established formal structure. The nature of Sorabji’s harmony—almost disembodied use of dissonance (especially semitonal opposition) and non-functional “tonal hierarchies” permitted an unusual flexibility in harmonic approach that in turn allowed counterpoint free reign within the texture.

³⁷ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 51–52.

While many elements of Sorabji's compositional style do appear as if they were pre-determined—namely the use of various patterns—the sheer variety and imagination lying behind the execution of these patterns and the nature of the textures and figuration cannot be ignored. With certain rare exceptions (such as the “bell” motive from “Quaere” that appears in fig. 52, or other deliberate allusions to previous pieces by him) each composition invariably introduces unique figuration and patterns; the fecundity of his musical imagination being most obvious in his variation sets.

By attempting to categorise his musical language in these ways we may make some tentative attempts to assess critically how successful his compositions were at expressing these ideas. How far can we determine which compositions are examples of “good” Sorabji or “bad” Sorabji? To what extent can we discern development, improvement or decline over the course of his compositional output?

Sorabji himself was dismissive of a number of his works, the early compositions in particular. The only one of these for which he retained any lasting affection was the Fantaisie espagnole for piano solo (1919), yet even this was described by him on at least one occasion as an “insipid baby-piece”.³⁸ The Two Pieces, the Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue, and the First Piano Quintet were all regarded by him as being either unrepresentative of his style, or simply “not . . . very good”.³⁹

Similarly, the three published Piano Sonatas, which are by far the most ambitious and “advanced” works of the early period, were later dismissed as

³⁸ This was in the dedication to Norman Peterkin of Toccata No. 2 (1933-34). Fantaisie espagnole had also been dedicated to Peterkin, and in the original dedication of the later work Sorabji wrote “To my friend Norman Peterkin— | and also to take out of his mouth | the taste of the insipid baby-piece | dedicated to him years ago.”

³⁹ Sorabji, A few further notes, 2–3.

unsuccessful. The reasons Sorabji gave for his disenchantment with these early works were two-fold:⁴⁰

1. “Foreign” elements, such as atonality or derivative style.
2. Lack of organisation and coherence.

This is revealing insofar as it justifies the use of patterns and the other organisational procedures that we have seen in operation in the more mature works: by these criteria the early compositions *are* unsuccessful. They are, however, interesting and worthy of study insofar as they provide an insight into Sorabji’s development, and the way in which an original musical language gradually emerged from the influences of other composers.

Among the compositions with which he was more satisfied were Piano Symphony No. 1, 100 Transcendental Studies, and Sequentia cyclica, as well as his Symphony “Jami”.⁴¹ However, these were opinions stated in 1953, when many of his major works had yet to be produced. Other people have suggested other compositions, or reported Sorabji’s own high regard, for example, “the Second Piano Symphony—which he declared for many years was his best work.”⁴²

The latest composition that he appears to have praised overtly is Toccata No. 4, describing it as “one of my best works, I think.”⁴³ Many of the later pieces (those produced from the early 1970s onwards) are less interesting. The tendency to expand

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sorabji, [Animadversions], 6–9, 17.

⁴² Frank Holliday, “A Few Recollections and Ruminations”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 90.

⁴³ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Alistair Hinton, 11 April 1972, quoted in Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 29–30.

single melodic lines into chords (especially of extended harmonies) reduces the number of textural layers (partly due to physical restrictions of hand position) and the sense of delineation. This in turn contributes to a less marked contrast between rhythms and contours in different layers (i.e., vertically) and sections (horizontally) of a piece. At the same time, the gradual blurring of style and character of certain movements (such as the aria and nocturne, or the interlude, prelude, and *cadenza*) that has been mentioned above contributes to a decrease in contrast in texture and figuration. However, the most significant development in the later works concerns harmony, namely the increasing complexity of the fundamental chordal elements used to govern both structure and figuration. For example, if one compares the harmonic formations used in Piano Symphony No. 1 with those in Piano Symphony No. 6 the difference in style becomes immediately apparent (a comparison of the opening page of each presents a reasonable overview). Whereas in the earlier work he uses simple triadic constructions for much of the time (regardless of the way in which these might be juxtaposed or contextualised), Symphonia Magna emphasises extended chords. The effect of this is that the bright colours (so to speak) of the “middle-period” works are gradually replaced by softer tints and blurred lines. The main problem with this approach is that the characteristic ambiguity of the later advanced harmonies leads to yet more lack of contrast—too many of the harmonies sound alike, and the other developments in texture and figuration only serve to compound this. One might even argue that the development of basic harmonic types in Sorabji’s output is a microcosm of the increase in complexity of harmony from the early Classical period to the dissolution of tonality in the early years of the twentieth century. While the later works are no less interesting purely in terms of their designs, in terms of their overall

effect they are generally less successful. It may well be that he had reached a compositional cul-de-sac that echoed the similar problems faced by composers using increasing chromatic harmony. If Sorabji had lived longer it is likely that he would have needed to find a radical change in approach or risk his style stagnating completely.

Brian Inglis has assigned to Opus clavicembalisticum the position of premier importance within Sorabji's output. His view is that:

Compositionally, in *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, Sorabji reached what could be considered to be the optimum of the musical style he had been developing throughout the first stage of his career, and went on developing hereafter without, however, superseding this plateau. It is a piece with a stature greater than that of any of Sorabji's previous works, and, perhaps, of any of his subsequent ones, for, although he exceeded the dimensions of the *Opus* in terms of length in later works (such as the Second Piano Symphony of 1952–1954, to name but one), it retains its stature by virtue of its complete compositional mastery and its historical significance.⁴⁴

It is understandable why this might be the work of choice for many people. Apart from the fact that its controversial role in Sorabji's career has given it a certain legendary status, it has also been made more accessible than the majority of his compositions by the fact that (as of 2001) it has appeared complete in three separate recordings and has been performed in concert in its entirety seven times (excluding the composer's own performance). Moreover, it is his only representative large-scale work that has been available in print (at least until 1977; a photocopy of the Curwen edition is still available from The Sorabji Archive, Bath). However, this does not guarantee it pride of place in Sorabji's output. It must be remembered that it is something of an anomaly, since it is consciously modelled upon a work by another

⁴⁴ Brian Andrew Inglis, "Subtexts and Agenda in Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum*", British Music 17 (1995): 39.

composer; it has a large-scale approach (particularly in its extensive use of fugue) that Sorabji never employed elsewhere in his output. There is also, perhaps, a barely perceptible imbalance in style—specifically texture (as a result of being based upon that of Busoni’s Fantasia contrappuntistica)—between Part I and the remainder of the work. If one examines each Part in isolation the difference becomes more apparent (it is largely due to the absence in Part I of the more florid and improvisatory figuration that appears in the two variation sets and Adagio). Nevertheless, from the point of view of a performance of the entire piece this is less obvious since Part I occupies only relatively a small part of the overall structure in comparison with the other two.

If one had to highlight a single work from Sorabji’s oeuvre it would perhaps not be a large-scale composition but a more modest one—Gulistan—that would make a better choice. While it is relatively short it is nonetheless substantial, being, at 30–40 minutes, longer than many symphonies. Despite this, it manages to sustain interest at a slow tempo due to the remarkable integration of the texture and figuration, as well as the richness of the harmony. In short, it spotlights one of Sorabji’s best features: his remarkable melodic invention and rhapsodic style, and presents it in a form that would readily fit onto a concert programme and so be easily accessible to even a casual listener.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

What is clear from chapter 5 is that whatever the problems of notation in his scores a considerable amount of care and attention was devoted to the design of his compositions, in terms of both large-scale form and the treatment of local harmony and textural organisation. However, this makes the problems of notation harder to understand; why be so careless in this area, while giving so much thought to the music itself? It is similar to the contradiction pointed out in chapter 4: why take so much trouble in the binding and presentation of his work when he couldn't (or wouldn't) eliminate all the mistakes and ambiguities? In fact, these inherent contradictions in the nature of his scores, both published and unpublished, are remarkably consistent with certain attitudes expressed either by him, or by others about him. Two of these are of particular importance:

1. His view of notation as shorthand, and the implications this has for performance.
2. His impatience with explaining, clarifying, or revising his ideas, whether in speech, in prose, or in music.

Sorabji apparently saw no contradiction between regarding notation as merely a shorthand and considering his scores fully notated (in the sense that he considered them “complete” and ready for publication or binding). What his statements imply is a belief that “music” (in the sense of a complete piece) is an autonomous entity, independent from both its notation and its performance: “The written note of the

music is merely a sort of short-hand ideogram, a Word of Power, like the Ineffable Monosyllable of Yoga, which serves as a *détente* for the infinite potencies behind it.”¹

This was a view that he repeated in later years:

I have long held that not only the written notes, as Busoni said, are merely the clumsy shorthand for the musical substance that they are intended to communicate, but that even performance itself also is a hint of what IS there, a hint limited by instruments[,] ears[,] and all such things. It is the psychic impact of the performers’ [sic] musical mind upon those of the sensitively attuned that really communicates the musical meanings through the obstructing media of ears, instruments and all. Does this sound VERY transcendental and far-fetched?²

So, as well as feeling restricted by the conventions of Western notation he felt hampered by the limitations of the instruments available to him, an opinion that clearly has its roots in the similar views expressed by Busoni.³ In addition, even a good performer could only provide a limited perspective of a piece’s potential range of expression, so in Sorabji’s eyes (or rather ears) some degree of approximation of performance was also inevitable. How effective an approximation it was depended on the skill of the performer—how capable they were at divining meaning from the shorthand of notation. It was an obsession with all of these limitations that contributed to the generation of so many problems in his scores and his failure to find a comprehensive solution.

¹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music”, The New English Weekly, 17 December 1936, 195.

² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, to Norman Gentieu, 27 November 1947, quoted in Rapoport, “Sorabji’s Other Writings”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 313–14.

³ Ferruccio Busoni, “Insufficiency of the Means for Musical Expression”, The Essence of Music and Other Papers, trans. Rosamund Ley (New York: Dover, 1987), 38–39. As noted in chapter 3, Sorabji’s own dissatisfaction can also be seen in the interest he took in experimental instruments, such as the Janko keyboard.

Instrumental Idealisation

Sorabji's attempts to bypass the limitations of Western notation have been considered in chapter 3, where they are most evident in his use of idealised note-values. Related to the concept of an idealised notation is his exploration of solo instrumental writing. This is most obvious in his piano works, by virtue of their pre-eminent position in his output, but can also be seen in his solo organ pieces. In these solo compositions he often seems to be writing for an "all-encompassing meta-instrument", rather than the actual instrument he had available.⁴

The trend towards a more orchestral concept of writing in his development of his Sonatas and solo Symphonies has already been discussed in chapter 5; he himself regarded the inspiration for this as coming from Alkan's "orchestral" treatment of the piano, particularly in his Douze Études dans les Tons Mineurs, op. 39.⁵

As has been pointed out, it is inconceivable that Sorabji was unaware of the compass of the piano. But he nevertheless wrote extended passages in extreme registers or even went beyond the limits of the standard keyboard entirely. In the case of his extended bass registers he was justified in doing this: Bösendorfer had produced a piano with an extension to create an eight octave compass. As a result he specified this instrument for a number of works, although he often wrote in such a way that the extension was only employed as an *ossia*.

⁴ Inglis, "Subtexts and Agenda", 42. It should be noted that Inglis is actually employing this description in a slightly different context: in the course of an architectural analogy he comments on the way in which Opus clavicembalisticum "encompasses a wide variety of formal models from the central European musical tradition . . . exalting the piano, as Busoni did, to the status of an all-encompassing meta-instrument."

⁵ Sorabji, Mi Contra Fa, 203; see also [Animadversions], 7.

However, Sorabji's orchestral pretensions went beyond his development of form and his use of register to encompass the different effects normally associated with other instruments. In certain instances, where he particularly wants to emphasise a musical statement, he follows Busoni's example (from the third movement of his Piano Concerto, op. 39) by adding down-bow markings to the notes—as in the opening of Opus clavicembalisticum, for example. While the influence of Busoni in this and other respects has been discussed in greater depth elsewhere,⁶ it is worth adding that this is by no means the only reference to violin technique to be found in Sorabji's piano writing. Also appearing in numerous places are “*pizzicato*”, “*spiccato*”, and both “*quasi saltando*” and “*quasi sautillé*”, as well as at least one example (fig. 60) of what Ronald Stevenson has described as a “diabolical suggestion of violin technique.”⁷



Fig. 60. “Violin technique” in Opus clavicembalisticum

⁶ Roberge, “Sorabji’s Deification of Busoni”, 123–36.

⁷ Ronald Stevenson, “*Opus Clavicembalisticum*—A Critical Analysis”, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Opus clavicembalisticum, John Ogdon (Altarus, AIR-CD-9075(4), 1989), 44.

As well as violin markings there are frequently to be found references to other instruments and effects. Directions such as “*quasi ‘mixtures’*” or “*quasi organo pieno*” are not uncommon in the piano music. Among others that appear are “*Quasi campane di Chiesa*”, “*Quasi Tambura*”, “*quasi tuba con sordino*”, and “*quasi piccolo stridente e acuto*”.

This feeling that he is writing “meta-instrumental” music is evident in the limitations of those instruments that he was forced to use, and this can inevitably also be seen in the differences between the textures and figuration of the solo piano and organ works. For example, the organist is hampered by physical limitations that are ameliorated in piano writing by the sustain and sostenuto pedals. The piano writing is, as a result, more varied in texture and flexible in counterpoint. On the other hand, the pianist has problems with long note values, particularly in the upper registers, due to the natural decay of the piano sound. In addition, although the pedals allow effects and connections that would not be possible on the organ, the sustenance of individual notes or chords may become blurred or lost altogether due to the limitations of those pedals. The sostenuto pedal goes some way towards helping, but one constantly gets the feeling that Sorabji would have liked several independent sostenuto pedals, or some way of sustaining the tone in the manner of the organ without having to keep the keys depressed.

Sorabji’s ideal instrument would therefore combine the sustaining power of the organ with the range of attack, dynamic flexibility and pedalling effects of the piano. As may be seen from his other instrumental markings he also wanted to include some of the effects of the orchestra, such as the pizzicato attack of the strings; he was attempting to recreate on a single instrument the *impression* of instrumental synergy

demonstrated by an entire orchestra. Although strictly speaking impossible, this is something that he apparently felt might be suggested—as a kind of *trompe d'oreille*—by the polyphony and range of effects of the piano or organ in the hands of a sensitive performer.

Idealisation In Performance

It is inevitable that reference to “sensitive” performers should encourage talk of special pleading, but we can examine Sorabji’s notion of such a performer by way of his published concert reviews and tie it in with his own attitudes. This may at least contribute to an understanding of the state of his music, his own performances, and even his prose.

It is clear that Sorabji’s view of performance was very much a Romantic one, in the tradition of the virtuoso pianist, best exemplified by Busoni. He saw no shame in modifying aspects of the writing in order to create a particular impression, or reinterpreting music written for harpsichord in order to “update” the original effects of registration. In other words, he took what was regarded for much of the latter part of the twentieth century as a very old-fashioned approach to the controversial subject of interpreting the composer’s intentions. Sorabji’s views on this kind “editing” may be seen from his report on a concert given on 30 April 1926, by Busoni’s pupil Egon Petri, at which Chopin’s Piano Sonata in B♭ minor, op. 35 was performed:

Some remarkably effective—and in its results wholly justifiable editing—such as the adoption of what I believe was Rubinstein’s custom of transposing the marching bell-figure on its reappearance after the Trio of the slow movement, an octave lower, and the playing of the finale twice through at a colossal speed with effects of colour and dynamics that were breath-taking in their daring and mastery, will undoubtedly arouse the indignation of what Busoni so well calls

“theoretico-practical pedantry” and “brow-puckering cogitations of stiffly solemn professors.”⁸

This octave transposition was also favoured by Rachmaninov—it may be heard in his recording of the work—and he was another performer admired by Sorabji, apparently as much for his judicious modifications for the purposes of interpretation as for his dexterity at the keyboard:

Apropos [Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in F Minor, op. 57 (“Appassionata”)], I had an amusing conversation with a pianist acquaintance . . . who took great exception to certain liberties he alleged Rachmaninoff to have taken with this work, which certainly did not disturb my equanimity. In such cases it is always overlooked, and especially by the smaller fry, naturally enough, that there is a master morality and slave morality in this matter of “Liberties,” real or supposed, in the treatment of one and the same work, by, on the one hand, the ineffably tiresome, dull, “sound” musician, and the great artist. The former, lacking the artistic stature to take risks successfully and pull them off, had no option but to make a virtue of his scrupulous adherence to the letter—even if, as it invariably does, the spirit utterly escapes him—the latter, by force of genius, and a clairvoyant insight that is the very essence, as it is the totally unarguable and indescribable quality, that hall marks [sic] the great artist, will take what seems to the small fry unwarrantable liberties. In so doing, however, they, by the virtue of their own powers, release the spirit in a way that *ces autres* can never, and never actually do. As Busoni says somewhere, the written notes are in a sense a shorthand, from which the performer has to deduce and sense the composer’s thought.⁹

With this in mind it is fascinating to compare these instances of creative “editing” by performers admired by Sorabji with his performances of his own music. One case is particularly revealing: that of Le Jardin Parfumé. This work is interesting, not only for the many problems of notation within the score, but for the fact that it was performed by Sorabji in a BBC broadcast, as well as recorded by him for Frank Holliday.

Although the BBC broadcast is no longer extant, the private recording survived long enough for a number of people, including Michael Habermann to listen to it. As we

⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music”, The New Age, 3 June 1926, 50.

⁹ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, “Music, Wireless”, The New Age, 11 May 1933, 20.

saw from the response quoted in chapter 2, Sorabji freely admitted to Habermann that he had taken liberties with the printed score:

I get over the ground in my own music, and . . . claim to do no more than give a bird[']s eye view of the music. Such liberties as I take—and who has better right to do so than myself in my own music?—are dictated by the condition of my fingers at any particular time when I was recording; then I modify and alter AS SUITS ME. That's all there is to it. The music *as printed* embodies my INTENTIONS.¹⁰ [My italics]

Once again Sorabji is effectively saying that his notation is a kind of shorthand, suggesting that what matters is not the patterns and symbols written on the page, but rather the music that lies behind them. As Paul Rapoport sees it:

His whole approach to music, including his own, focused on deep, transcendental meaning, in which specific details mattered less than the whole. His impatience with those details is not surprising, but it gave us imperfect evidence of his musical intentions. These intentions, however, seem not to have included an overly literal approach to his own scores. The evidence for this is overwhelming: his own playing, his approval of others' far from literally correct performances, even the scores themselves, where making every note sound as written is often likely to give a stiff, dry exasperating result.¹¹

A further link may perhaps be made between the issues of “liberties”, the “stiff, dry exasperating result”, and Sorabji's comments on performance practice (see chapter 1). In these cases he was concerned about “overliteral” performances with “too scrupulous adherence to the letter”, which is why he tended to prefer performers such as Landowska, Busoni, and Petri—who, to his mind, were able to see beyond the “shorthand”—to the likes of Albert Schweitzer.

Dr. Schweitzer's authority and scholarship in the matter of Bach are as vast and crushingly monumental as those of Professor Tovey, and this organ-playing, is like Professor Tovey's piano-playing, that is to say, the “sound,” painstaking laboriousness of the scholar and scholiast who so often fails to see that the notes

¹⁰ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Michael Habermann, 28 February 1972, published in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 362.

¹¹ Rapoport, “Sorabji: A Continuation”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 83.

are not the music, but, as Busoni so well said, only a sort of shorthand transcript, very inadequate and imperfect, of the composer's thought; from which the performer has to deduce, and in some sort, reconstruct, the music. No more startling contrast could be afforded than by comparing these records of Dr. Schweitzer's the scholar merely, with Landowska's playing of the Chromatic Fantasia which I have earlier reviewed, which is both that of the scholar *and* the artist of genius.¹² [My underlining]

[Wanda Landowska's] finest piece of playing was that of the Scarlatti Sonata for crossed keyboards, in which the full resources of the player and her instrument were brought into use, and in this work it was once again impressed upon one how much the music of this period loses when played upon the piano, lacking as this instrument does the many mutation and coupler devices of the harpsichord which were used to embroider and fill out what was a sort of shorthand of the composer's intentions (the page of music as written). The neglect to replace these effects on the piano, so far from being a scrupulous and conscientious following of the composer's intentions, as our ignorant pianists think, is actually a falsification of them through an omission of the executive devices the player of the time used, and was expected to use, within the limits of his own good taste.¹³

By advocating this view Sorabji comes close to the idealistic approach he took towards his own music: that is to say, writing for the instruments that he hoped would one day become available, rather than limiting himself to the ones he already had.

Just as he expected a "great artist", such as Landowska, Busoni, Petri, Rachmaninov, et al., to modify and adapt the text where necessary to create what he considered to be appropriate effects, so he expected the prospective performer of his own music to think beyond the notes (and therefore the ambiguities) to produce his or her own interpretation—something that Geoffrey Douglas Madge has confirmed:

¹² Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music", The New English Weekly, 18 June 1936, 196.

¹³ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "Music", The New Age, 9 June 1927, 69. Landowska was of course using her beloved Pleyel harpsichord—much admired by Sorabji.

“Sorabji himself preferred me to follow my own inclinations and certainly not to imitate his playing”.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Sorabji’s idea of notation as shorthand does not provide explanations or solutions for the passages, such as those to be found in figs. 6, 8, 9, and 27, where the music displays a purely visual continuity, but breaks down aurally due to poorly placed or missing elements of notation. At such points, Sorabji’s apparent *obsession* (which is surely how it must be seen, in the light of those comments of his expressed in chapter 2) with putting notes down on paper as quickly as possible works against him. Again, Derus’s picture of the composer writing down his music “at unbelievable speed . . . without looking ahead or back” is misleading, not because it is necessarily inaccurate, but rather because it simply does not tell the whole story. So intent is Sorabji on continuing with his work that he does not allow himself the time to go back and make corrections. A similar attitude is evident in the reported nature of his speech and prose.

Links To Sorabji’s Prose And Speech

To some extent a comparison may be—and has been—made between Sorabji’s musical compositions, his prose, and his conversational style.¹⁵ Opinion varies as to the degree to which this may be applicable, but invariably concentrates on the areas of style and construction:

Hinton makes a thought-provoking connection between Sorabji’s literary style, “with its penchant for extremely long sentences of complex yet flawless construction”, and “certain of his compositional techniques”. Having myself

¹⁴ Madge, “Performing *Opus clavicembalisticum*”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 393.

¹⁵ Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 21.

received many letters and a few 'phone calls from Sorabji and having visited him a few times, I think that his epistolary style and conversation, more than his printed prose, related to his compositions which were written without preliminary sketches. He spoke very rapidly without pausing for breath. One sentence could embrace two or three languages. His music has very few rests and all the different registers are used frequently.¹⁶

However, there is no reason why the comparison may not be extended to the matters of notation and presentation, particularly where his prose is concerned. Indeed, this is perhaps more profitable, since it is notable that his treatment of grammar and spelling was sometimes idiosyncratic or forgetful; abbreviations and other contractions were sometimes also employed unexpectedly. When combined with a less-than-perfect presentation this led to difficulties arising that are comparable to the musical problems discussed in previous chapters. On at least one occasion Sorabji wrote to a journal to complain about misprints in one of his letters that had been published. This complaint—to The Musical Times—was printed along with the editor's reply: "If Mr. Sorabji will in future send his letters in typescript instead of barely decipherable handwriting, we will promise a freedom from misprints—at all events from 'glaring examples'."¹⁷

Unfortunately, Sorabji's typed correspondence was just as messy—and error-ridden. He openly admitted to being the "world's worst typist",¹⁸ or, as others

¹⁶ Ronald Stevenson, review of Sorabji—A Critical Celebration, edited by Paul Rapoport, in Tempo 185 (June 1993): 35.

¹⁷ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "The Mason and Hamlin Pianoforte", The Musical Times 71 (1 August 1930): 739. A similar complaint on another occasion met with the excuse that "his handwriting baffled our printers." (Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, "A Protest", The Gramophone 4, no. 3 [August 1926]: 113).

¹⁸ Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji to Paul Rapoport, 25 December 1974, published in Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 60–61.

sometimes preferred to put it, “trypist”.¹⁹ However, in both these cases what is remarkable is not just his apparently slapdash approach to the act of writing (if not the actual ideas or arguments), but the fact that he was willing to send letters and articles to people in this state—an attitude that many people would consider discourteous. There seems to be little difference between his willingness to do this and his apparent willingness to publish his musical scores without thorough attempts at proof-reading and correction; or, for that matter, the quasi-improvisational approach taken by him in the recordings he made for Erik Chisholm and Frank Holliday.

It appears difficult at first to argue that—as with his music—some of the problems in the prose occurred because written and / or spoken language were inadequate at conveying his thoughts; music notation is without doubt considerably less flexible and adaptive. Nevertheless, we may see a similar motivation prompting the use of foreign words and phrases in both his speech and prose. Sorabji had a reasonable working knowledge of several European languages—enough to appreciate when a specific nuance conveyed by a foreign phrase might be more apposite than an English equivalent—but he was the first to admit that his talents in this direction were limited, and occasionally led to unidiomatic constructions or neologisms.²⁰

Rapoport—as with his music—excuses him these lapses on the grounds of his instinctively holistic approach, at the expense of “matters of lesser importance”:

Most of the errors in Sorabji’s grammar and spelling on his manuscripts are probably due to his not wishing or needing to check small points with some source such as a dictionary—if indeed he kept a dictionary. The great speed with which he often wrote is part of the problem too, not only making some things very

¹⁹ Rapoport, “Sorabji’s Other Writings”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 297.

²⁰ Rapoport, “Could you just send me a list of his works?”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 93–191 (and in particular pages 96–97).

hard to read but simply reflecting his desire to get on with the task and not stop for details or matters of lesser importance. Since he composed most of these works with no intention of public performance or printing in mind, he could and did take a lot for granted in writing them down.²¹

However, he fails to explain why it was *necessary* for him to work at such speed (except, perhaps, for his concert reviews), or why he should omit to make detailed corrections subsequently. And, as the previous chapters demonstrated, mistakes also plague those compositions produced *before* he turned his back on public performance and initiated the ban. As we shall see, we can identify a particular aspect of his character that undoubtedly contributed to this apparently cavalier attitude towards inaccuracy in both his prose and music.

The other major characteristic to be found in his expression of spoken and musical languages is the speed at which it was articulated. As the Stevenson comments that have already been quoted reveal: “He spoke very rapidly without pausing for breath. One sentence could embrace two or three languages.”²² Alistair Hinton confirms that “he invariably spoke at a speed almost too great for intelligibility; one had to adjust one’s means of aural perception to take it all in.”²³ However, perhaps most revealing is Geoffrey Douglas Madge’s recollection that “He spoke very fast, often with a mixture of languages. . . . His conversation took in all possible topics. . . . He disliked having to explain his points, you either understood it, or—*basta!*”²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 97.

²² Stevenson, Review of Sorabji—A Critical Celebration, 35.

²³ Hinton, “Sorabji: An Introduction”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 33.

²⁴ Geoffrey Douglas Madge, “My Meetings with Sorabji and his *Opus clavicembalisticum*”, liner notes for Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji. Opus

Again, it is clear that the speed at which he wrote down his compositions manifested itself in other activities, and Madge has provided the clue to the unifying factor: his impatience. In both his prose and his compositions his impatience was evident in what Rapoport described above as “his desire to get on with the task and not stop for details or matters of lesser importance.”²⁵ This reluctance to accommodate “matters of lesser importance” included his dislike of having to explain his points, and, in the case of the music, his dislike of extensive corrections, clarifications, or revisions. Since Sorabji considered notation, instruments and even performance to be imperfect media for conveying his music, what was the point in spending so much time trying to refine it? It could never be exact, and he could put the time to better use in composing a new piece. To be sure, he took some trouble over the proofs of his publications, but, as we have seen, for one reason or another, he was by no means thorough, and the results are comparable to his “tryed” prose.

And so on the one hand we have Sorabji seeking the most evocative means of expression, characterised by his view of notation as shorthand, his “meta-instrumentalism”, and his abrupt switches to foreign languages (accurate or not) in his speech; on the other we have the hyperactive composer with what amounted to an *obsession* with putting notes down on paper, whose impatience led to a remarkable celerity in writing and speech, and a dislike of correction and explanation.

clavicembalisticum, Geoffrey Douglas Madge (BIS: BIS-CD-1062/64, 1999), 10.

²⁵ Rapoport, “Could you just send me a list of his works?”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 97.

Conclusion

It is clear that until relatively recently people have received a largely misleading impression of Sorabji's music. Leaving aside the legendary aspect, this is partly because those works of his that were published are not particularly characteristic in terms of style, being immature, experimental, or transitional in nature, but also because the more serious issue of errors and ambiguities in his scores had not become fully apparent. Again partly due to those works of his that were initially available via the publications or the shorter, more quickly edited, manuscripts, performances of his music have been of pieces of relatively small scale and complexity. Inevitably in these smaller-scale pieces the number of problems has been limited and many of the more disruptive features—those influenced by the considerations of vertical and horizontal expansion in texture, as described in chapter 3—have been absent. It is only as the larger, more characteristic, works have begun to be edited and prepared for performance that the true nature of the scores has been revealed.

In retrospect we can suggest that Sorabji's desire to exploit Yoga to concentrate his thoughts was indeed sensible; if he had been able to utilise it successfully it might have improved his self-discipline to the point that many of the mistakes in his scores would have been eradicated. So in fact the ideas expressed in "Yoga and the Composer" do not provide an explanation for the supposed perfection of his writing; on the contrary, they confirm Sorabji's own awareness of his need to focus his compositional outlook and increase his self-discipline. According to his view, he was dealing, in music, with something inchoate and in need of interpretation. The undoubtedly religious and ritualistic overtones in this notion, with the composer and

the performer acting as different kinds of medium,²⁶ make the spiritualist myths that surround it understandable, but Sorabji's aims were ultimately more practical: to find a way of translating an abstract concept into an imperfect vessel.

With this in mind, we might suggest that it was not that Sorabji took the attitude of “anything goes” where performance was concerned; on the contrary, as the ferocity of his concert reviews and his admission of his own pianistic limitations bear witness. It was rather that he didn't expect performers to take an overly literal approach with his music (or that of other composers, as the above remarks confirm) because he believed that the notation and the instrument were essentially imperfect tools and they had to be employed as such, with the performance itself providing an equally limited canvass for a larger picture. He was able to get away with numerous liberties in his own performances because the complexity of his scores gave him ample scope for a liberal interpretation while retaining the general idea—the “bird's eye view”. Unfortunately, he expected others to have an instinctive awareness of this, and since he declined to provide himself, or advise others in, any kind of performing tradition for his work it is not surprising that so much controversy has arisen over the years as to the nature of his music.

It is clear that what we have been left with are works that are not incompetent in their conception; but rather flawed in their execution. The circumstances of his life indulged these flaws in his compositional practice, since having to work for deadlines, and for imposed controls on quality, would have forced him to refine his notation and presentation. His intellectual freedom, unhindered by conventions and peer pressure,

²⁶ Most clearly seen in his chapter “‘Performance’ versus ‘Celebration’” from Around Music (London: Unicorn Press, 1932), 198–200.

allowed him develop his unique style, even as it blunted his self-discipline, because he had no one to answer to. Indeed, during the period of the ban he was able to avoid the necessity for self-discipline altogether, since there was no longer any prospect of his music being performed, or even seen, except by people who were already sympathetic to his ideals. His chapter “Yoga and the Composer” from Mi Contra Fa reveals an awareness of the need for self-discipline, but for the purposes of compositional design and coherence, rather than accuracy of notation. Unfortunately, despite the care that he took to ensure that his music itself was coherent, it is those slips in notation that were never corrected, even after the unofficial ban had been lifted, that undermine the structure of the music by disrupting its continuity. When coupled with the fact that he (by his own admission) experimented without hope or desire of hearing the results of those experiments it is hardly surprising that so many problems are to be found within the pages of his scores.²⁷

Although the full extent of the errors and ambiguities within Sorabji’s manuscripts and publications is only now starting to become apparent it is clear that there will be people who are willing to study and play his music despite the flaws in its notation: the performances and recordings of problematic scores such as Le Jardin Parfumé and Opus clavicembalisticum are proof of that. However, it is equally clear that of all the hurdles faced by potential performers and scholars of his music the greatest is Sorabji himself, thanks to his unwillingness to correct the most serious faults in his scores, even after he had started to allow his music to be played again after 1976. The irony is that by seeking (via his ban) to avoid unwarranted criticism, misperception, or “obscene travesties” of his music during his lifetime he has left it—

²⁷ Rapoport, “Sorabji: A Continuation”, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 83.

and himself—open to potentially greater criticism today; criticism that is arguably more justified, given that he could have removed at least the most disruptive of the problems of notation and continuity that he instead allowed to remain in his scores.

Future Research

This thesis has inevitably concentrated on the solo piano works because they make up such an overwhelming proportion of his output and as a result define most clearly the characteristics and development of his writing. However, there is still much valuable study to be done where the orchestral and chamber pieces are concerned. We have mentioned how the piano and organ works are orchestral in conception; if this is the case then how are the genuine chamber and orchestral textures expressed? What is the relationship between orchestra or chamber ensemble and a solo instrument?

Rapoport has commented that: “Nearly always Sorabji wrote his piano concertos (as well as the second quintet, and probably his first too) by writing the entire piano part first, and the accompanying forces later.”²⁸ He has connected this with Sorabji’s view of the piano as the centre of the work by quoting from a note in the manuscript of Opus clavisymphonicum, which states, “This work revolves around the Piano as the Solar System revolves around the Sun.”²⁹ While this conclusion has been accepted by some, others, such as Christopher Berg, have reservations.³⁰ Berg points out that as

²⁸ Rapoport, ““Could you just send me a list of his works?””, in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 192.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Christopher Berg, “Sorabji’s Piano Quintet (1920)”, The British Music Society News 79 (September 1998): 212.

there are places in Piano Quintet No. 1, “such as measure 44, in which a piano figuration becomes harmonically meaningful only in relation to the underlying string chords”, this practice may not have been followed consistently. The question that inevitably arises—as to the extent to which Sorabji planned the way in which all the elements of the texture were to be integrated before he started to write it down—is an interesting one, especially given the circumstances outlined in the present study, and might profitably be discussed in relation to two works in particular: Symphony II and Symphonic Variations.

As we have seen, the full title of Symphony II was originally Symphony II for Piano, Large Orchestra, Organ, Final Chorus, and Six Solo Voices; we are left in no doubt that this was to be a major undertaking. There is no reason to suppose that in this form it was intended to be anything other than a primarily orchestral symphony—like his earlier Symphony for Piano, Large Orchestra, Chorus, and Organ, which has an elaborate and predominant piano part. However, according to scrawled comments on the title page of the manuscript of Symphony II, Sorabji “got bored with this”, and the complete piano part is all that was written. Nevertheless, he evidently only changed his mind about the instrumental forces of Symphony II at a late stage—at least as far as the end of the Cadenza-fugato—since the manuscript at this point has the marking “Segue il Cantico”, followed by “*Durante tutto il cantico tace il pianoforte:*”. No material of any kind for the Cantico movement of the symphony has ever come to light, but it seems likely that it was never written—more evidence that he was writing the complete piano part first of all.

Given the complexity of the extant piano part one wonders what exactly the relationship between it and the organ, chorus, soloists, and orchestra would have been.

Would the piano have been doubling most or all of the parts?; it is hard to imagine that any more distinct lines could have been introduced by the other forces, not least in the long and highly complex fugue—surely complete as it is. As it stands the piano part really does form a self-contained solo piano piece, structurally and texturally. So perhaps what we have now was originally a piano reduction of the entire work, which would subsequently have been orchestrated out. If this was the case, is there evidence in the other orchestral works?

The work that is of most interest in connection with this question is his Symphonic Variations, which exists in two versions. The earlier piano solo score, arranged in three parts, was produced between 1935 and 1937. The composer started writing an orchestral accompaniment at this time, but broke off after completing the first four variations. He eventually completed the piano and orchestra score of Part 1 in the mid-1950s, but at this stage he left the piece again, and this time never returned to it.

The fact that it was originally conceived as a work for piano and orchestra is clear from the title that appears on the first page of the earlier solo piano part: “Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra”. In addition, a number of the variations in this score (including 50, 52, 55, 60, 70, and 80) are marked “Orchestra”. In the later full score we can see changes in the distribution of the instruments; variation 19, which has no special markings and is written out in full in the piano solo manuscript, is arranged for orchestra alone in the later version. This would tend to suggest that the piano score was really the entire score in reduction, but if this is the case where do the “new” orchestral parts to be found in the other variations (for

instance var. 27) come from? So what exactly is the purpose of these piano solo scores?

One answer might be that the piano scores in such cases are not so much reduced versions of the final texture, but self-contained cores—which is why they make sense as continuous pieces. It is the piano that introduces all the themes of a work; this is clearly to be seen in the completed Piano Quintet No. 2. It is tempting to suggest that Sorabji was interested in producing a relationship between the piano and orchestra that was comparable to that in Busoni's Piano Concerto—but with the priorities of the forces reversed. Whereas in Busoni's work the orchestra introduces the themes, while the piano "listens, comments, decorates, and dreams",³¹ Sorabji prefers to elevate the piano to *primus inter pares*, surrounded by the orchestra, "as the Solar System revolves around the Sun."

So far little has been written about Sorabji's orchestral and chamber music, but there is clearly much of interest to be discovered concerning his exploitation of these forces, not least given the "experimental" nature of much of his orchestration.³² There is little doubt that this could potentially be an important avenue of research into the composer's attitude towards compositional design—especially given the problems of notation and continuity that have been illustrated in this thesis.

³¹ Dent, 145.

³² Rapoport, "Sorabji: A Continuation", in Sorabji, ed. Paul Rapoport, 83.

APPENDIX

THE TEXT OF SORABJI'S "ANALYTICAL NOTE" FOR PIANO SONATA NO. 4

Analytical Note

This work is the first of my Sonatas to be divided into movements, of which it has three. In amplitude of plan and scale it is a further contribution to the scheme of the short programme occupied entirely by one long work—an idea first suggested in my Organ Symphony[,] and again in my Dies Irae Variations for Piano and my fifth Piano Concerto. Like them it is of great and unusual Difficulty, the resources and techniques of the keyboard being developed to the fullest.

I. Vivo. Arditamente. The first movement opens with a short section corresponding to the exposition of the classical sonata form. Seven themes—a, b, c, d, e, f, g,—of varying character are rapidly enunciated in immediate juxtaposition and in several instances contrapuntally superimposed one on another. The first (a) of these is the dominant theme of the entire work, its influence being perceptible in the themes of the following movements in more or less marked degree, when it does not (as often it does) appear in its original form or slightly disguised. The transition from the expository section to the development is immediate and direct. The latter is extended and complex, the seven themes being treated in every conceivable way singly, or in combinations of two or more at a time, with sundry changes of character and tempo, the Dominant Theme always more or less perceptibly pervading the music. There is towards the end of the Movement a sort of Stretto-Recapitulation in which all seven Themes contend together for mastery[,] as it were[,] with the gradual emergence into complete paramoun[t]cy of the Dominant Theme in a powerful climax, subsiding into a very short abrupt codetta-like passage based entirely on the Dominant Theme.

II. Lento—languido e sonnolente. This movement (in its traditional place as slow movement) is in the nature of an extended and elaborate nocturne[,] sultry and exotic in character. Five themes of a drowsy insinuating nature twine their way in and out of the ever-increasing luxuriance of the vegetation[,] so to speak. All kinds of decoration motives are made out of the various themes[,] against which[,] as against a background[,] other of the themes deploy themselves in variants of sundry species. After a texture climax, as opposed to a dynamic climax, in which the foliage seems to attain the maximum of ful[l]ness—the whole movement is scarcely even above pianissimo—the music sinks down to rest on a slowly ebbing pulsation into silence and darkness.

[Themes h. j. k. l. m]

III. The third movement consists of a number of sections forming together a self-contained and almost independent work, except for thematic connections and relationships which bind it logically to the rest of the Sonata. The first section is a Preludio of a perpetuum-mobile[-]like character on a continuously reiterated Pedal E,—and with a subject obviously related to the Dominant Motive. This gives place [sic] to a Fantasia of eldritch scherzo-like character with abrupt broken phrases and

rhythms[,] introducing two more themes while also using that of the Preludio. A Cadenza[,] also on a pedal[,] reflects the character of the Preludio, but with much greater metrical freedom (irregular groups of semiquavers in place of a constant crotchet value as unit). All through the Cadenza are worked the preceding themes. There follows a twofold fugue. This is a pair of fugues[,] each worked out independently from the other before combination of their two subjects in the Coda-Stretta. Each of the fugues is in reality quadruple—having four expositions with four complete workings of the four forms of their respective subjects, that is to say recto—cancrizans—inversus—cancrizans inversus. In each of the ensuing forms of the four expositions the previously used forms of the subject are used as countersubjects. The Coda-Stretta is extremely involuted and complex, all four forms of the two subjects* being woven together in the texture, setting some amusing problems of digitation.† The treatment becomes fuller and weightier, moving to a massive close with a final powerful declamation, by the whole orchestra[,] so to speak, of the Dominant Motive of the entire work. The voice entries in the fugues take place in a regular series of cyclic rotations.

[Themes — o, p, r, s, t: v: (fugue subjects)]

* together with augmented versions of them—

† there are often as many as seven real parts divided between the two hands.

Kaikhosru Sorabji

Rome. 5.4.MCMXXIX

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